**Brushing Your Pet's Teeth Can Be As Easy as 1-2-3**

Regular brushing and annual dental cleaning are just as important for dogs and cats as they are for humans, according to the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA).

"Too often, we overlook the need for dental care for our pets," said Dr. Ed Eisner, an AAHA member who specializes in veterinary dentistry. "Untreated teeth can cause serious problems in the overall health of the pet."

Periodontal disease is the number one dental problem in dogs, and cats often develop cavities below the gumline which may be hard to detect. As in humans, abscessed teeth or periodontal disease can often affect other parts of the body. In dogs and cats, it can cause heart and kidney disease.

A regular veterinary dental checkup and cleaning under a short-lasting anesthetic is important to your pet's good health. Equally important is home dental care, such as brushing the pet's teeth at least three times per week. Following is a technique for both younger and older animals.

1. To introduce your pet to brushing, wrap a gauze or washcloth around your finger and use it like a toothbrush on the pet's teeth. Wipe all of the teeth, front and back, with strokes from the gumline to the tip of the tooth. Do this for one to two weeks until your pet is familiar with having the gums and teeth rubbed.

2. Gradually work up to a soft toothbrush and plain water. After a week of using a soft toothbrush, add a small amount of special dog or cat toothpaste. Never use human toothpaste as it will irritate the pet's stomach.

3. Begin by brushing the front teeth and then the large upper and lower teeth in the back. The bristles should be held at a 45-degree angle to the tooth surface and be moved in an oval direction. Scrub in the crevice where the gums meet the teeth as this is where odor and infection begin.

"We encourage people to regularly examine their pet's teeth for signs of periodontal disease, such as swollen, red, or bleeding gums; persistent bad breath; loose teeth or the loss of teeth; pus between the gums and teeth; broken teeth; and any unusual growth in the mouth," said Dr. Eisner. "Reluctance to eat, play with chew toys, or drink cold water are warning signs of periodontal or gum disease."