

# Veterinary Practice News

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## Brushing up

on home dental care tips for clients

- Bad breath can be a health hazard
- Cats have teeth, too!

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**BAD BREATH?**



REFERENCES 1. State of pet health 2016 report. Banfield Pet Hospital. <http://www.stateofpethealth.com>. Accessed September 23, 2021

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FOR SOME REASON,  
**CAT-OWNING**  
CLIENTS SEEM TO FORGET  
**CATS NEED**  
DENTAL CARE, TOO



# Take a bite out of dental disease and increase at-home care for patients



Photo courtesy andres/Getty Images

Educating clients about dental health can save them money in the long run, but it can also save pets from potential health concerns

By Kim Campbell Thornton

**F**rom bad breath and periodontal disease to broken teeth and oral tumors, dental problems are among the most common problems veterinarians diagnose in pets. They are also among the most preventable and treatable problems, but sometimes getting clients to take dental care seriously is, well, like pulling teeth.

Educating clients about dental care and the effect it has on overall pet health can not only improve dog and cat oral health, it can also have a healthy effect on your bottom line as well as the human-animal bond. The secret is helping clients recognize what kind of care their pets need.

“I think most clients love their pets and none of them like bad breath,” says Liz Bales, VMD, in Philadelphia. “It can come as a surprise their pet’s mouth needs regular dental care, like tooth brushing and regular dental cleanings, just like they do.”

## Pet dental stats

It’s estimated by the time pets are three to four years old, 80 percent of dogs and 70 percent of cats may have periodontal disease, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). Other common oral health problems include broken teeth and roots, abscesses and other infections, oral tumors, malocclusions, and palate defects.

A Swedish survey of pet owners, published in *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* in 2020, found the ability of owners to assess a dog’s dental health varied significantly depending on age, weight, breed, breed group, sex, and concurrent disease. Other factors that influenced owner assessment of a dog’s dental health were age, education, urban or rural environment, and whether or not they were breeders.

“Dog owners with smaller dogs, older dogs, and certain breeds predisposed to periodontal disease assessed their dogs’ dental health as worse than their counterparts, which is in agreement with previously reported higher prevalence of dental disease in these groups,” researchers reported. The results, they wrote, highlight the need for routine professional assessment of periodontal health, as well as education of dog owners and training of dogs to accept dental care procedures.

“I think, as a profession, we’ve done a lot better about talking about dental disease,” says Heather Skinner, DVM, at Indian Trail Animal Hospital in Spokane, Wash. “Either they smell the bad breath or they take their dogs to the veterinarian and we tell them. I do still get clients here and there that I show them the dog’s mouth and they go, ‘Oh, I had no idea. I’ve never looked in their mouth.’”

## Head start

Better dental care starts with alerting clients early on to the importance of oral health. They need to know inflamed gums and infected teeth are painful, even if pets don’t show it. Periodontal disease or broken teeth can limit a pet’s ability to eat and enjoyment of food. No pet lover wants that. Further, according to AVMA, periodontal disease isn’t limited to the mouth. It is also thought to be associated with changes in the kidneys, liver, and heart, although to date few studies have been published on this topic.

“It’s all about client education from an early age,” says Kelly Byam, DVM, owner of Abel Pet Clinic in Elk Grove, Calif. When people bring in puppies or kittens, she talks about the need to provide oral health care, including tooth brushing, and how it contributes to an increased lifespan. She reinforces the message by checking the teeth at every examination and instructing owners to “flip that lip” once a weekend and give teeth a good look. That way, dental care becomes established as part of a pet’s regular health care.

Chew sticks and dental toys can help keep teeth clean between checkups and cleanings. They can also boost the clinic’s retail sales.

Chew sticks and dental toys can help keep teeth clean between checkups and cleanings. They can also boost the clinic’s retail sales.

“Kittens will be more amenable to accepting tooth brushing if it is introduced while they are still young.”

Clients may laugh when you recommend brushing a pet’s teeth. Dr. Skinner tells them she’s no hypocrite. Brushing her own dogs’ teeth is part of their daily routine.

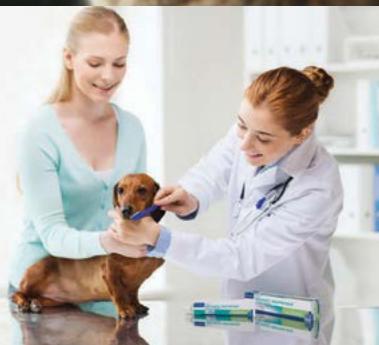
“It can be very simple, from wiping the outside of their teeth with a cloth to using just a basic toothbrush that you can get from the dollar store and using a little bit of a pet toothpaste, and just focusing for 10 seconds on the outside of those big teeth in the back and the canine teeth in the front, and that alone can go a really long way and can prevent having to do dentals yearly or even every other year,” she says.

Don’t forget cats. It’s even more important to establish a home dental routine for them at an early age. Kittens will be more amenable to accepting tooth brushing if it is introduced while they are still young. Cats are less likely to be brought to the veterinarian for regular checkups, so getting owners started on caring for their teeth while kittens are cute and easily trainable can help to keep their teeth and gums healthy and get owners in the habit of looking in their mouths regularly and noticing problems before they become serious.

Whether patients are dogs or cats, talking about dental care early is the best way to emphasize its importance, Dr. Byam says. “Dental disease, just like in humans, will shorten lifespan. We do think it’s important if clients want pets to have a long and healthy life to have adequate dental care.”

## Silver bullets?

Clients often wonder if there’s an easier way to care for pet teeth than daily brushing. It’s still the gold standard, but other types of products may also contribute to good oral health by breaking down plaque through enzymatic or mechanical action or preventing plaque from adhering to teeth. Dental diets, too, may help a little bit, Dr. Bales says, noting not every animal is amenable to tooth brushing.



# Support the Pillars of Dental Health

With a pervasive condition like dental disease, promoting a consistent dental care routine is vital.

## THERE ARE THREE PILLARS OF DENTAL HEALTH CARE



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<sup>1</sup> Global dental guidelines. World Small Animal Veterinary Association. <https://wsava.org/global-guidelines/global-dental-guidelines/>. Accessed November 2, 2021.

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At VCA Woodland Central Animal Hospital in Tulsa, associate veterinarian Allison Ruicker, DVM, shares spreadsheets of products approved by the Veterinary Oral Health Council and sends home dental samples with pets who need at-home dental care, encouraging clients to try different products to find the ones their pets like best.

“I have found a nice handout on how to train dogs and cats to allow their teeth to be brushed and educate clients we need to train dogs and cats to allow teeth brushing in order to be effective,” she says. “I also share which products I have used on my pets and my experience with each product.”

The best products, she says, are those a client is willing and able to use every day and a pet will tolerate.

“If we are not using products daily,” she says, “there is often limited benefit.”

### Professional cleaning

When clients don't brush pet teeth on a regular basis, professional cleanings must stand in for that dental care. Clients may balk, however, not only at the cost, but also at the necessity for general anesthesia. Explaining what a professional cleaning involves can help to assuage concerns in both areas.

Let clients know a professional cleaning does more than just provide pets with a pretty smile. An oral exam, complete with radiographs, can turn up fractured teeth, tooth root abscesses, and oral tumors. When clients know a professional cleaning can be an opportunity to identify painful or serious conditions, they may be more amenable to making an appointment.

When pets are reluctant to enter veterinary clinics or exam rooms, let alone have their mouths examined or undergo a professional cleaning, low-stress, Fear Free or cat-friendly techniques can help. Dr. Ruicker prescribes pre-visit pharmaceuticals for these patients. At the clinic, she makes use of pheromone therapy and calming music. Prior to surgery, pets are housed in quieter areas conducive to relaxation.

### Fear factors

Often clients are resistant to professional cleanings because they are concerned about anesthesia risks, especially with senior or geriatric animals. Bales is sympathetic.



Photo courtesy Brauns/Getty Images

## What's living in a cat's mouth?

A cheek swab can tell you a lot about a feline patient's oral health. The oral microbiome—the bacteria, fungi, viruses, and more living in a cat's mouth—differs between healthy and unhealthy mouths.

Liz Bales, VMD, says a new test by Basepaws, called the DentalCat Kit, can be used to evaluate a cat's oral microbiome by identifying microbial signatures associated with certain dental conditions in cats. The screening test provides risk scores for periodontal disease and tooth resorption and suggests appropriate clinical care for individual cats. ●

“When my pets undergo anesthesia, I worry, too,” she says. “But the risks of dental disease on our pets' overall health are far more common than anesthetic incident.”

To minimize client fears, she recommends a full CBC/chemistry and physical exam prior to a dental so they know she's aware of any special needs or underlying conditions.

Ruicker also relates to clients who are concerned about anesthesia risks. She has three senior pets, two of which are brachycephalic breeds.

“Anesthesia is always a risk, so showing empathy and building rapport with clients is helpful to build trust,” she says. “I try my best to educate clients on what anesthesia entails, the monitoring involves, and the risk of leaving periodontal disease.”

Skinner reassures clients by outlining the basic anesthesia protocol and explaining the multimodal approach, as well as monitoring protocols.

“We're using small amounts of different drugs, so overdosing is very difficult,” she tells them. A technician monitors heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, and breathing throughout the procedure. “I assure them our anesthetic protocols are something we've been working on for years and they've become very safe and efficient. The risk of anesthesia is always there, but it's not really something we worry about often.”

Clients may ask about non-anesthesia dental cleanings. Dr. Byam conveys the procedures are cosmetic only. Veterinarians may be unable to perform a thorough oral exam, including radiographs, which could turn up serious problems. The AVMA advises procedures such as periodontal probing, intraoral radiography, dental scaling, and dental extraction be performed under anesthesia.

### Make a plan

Pet owners may feel overwhelmed or take it personally when told their pet has dental issues. Assure them they're not alone. As with humans, pets need dental care throughout life. Work with them to develop a treatment plan and a manageable preventive care plan.

Bales assesses what clients are willing to do and creates a dental care routine that includes home care and annual veterinary dental cleanings if possible. She suggests videos to help with tooth-brushing technique.<sup>1,2</sup>

Sometimes cost of professional cleanings is a concern for clients. Help them plan for it. “We try and talk about prevention first, just like with anything,” Dr. Skinner says, “but sometimes I will, in an annual exam, sit down with a client and say, ‘Hey, your dog's teeth are not bad, but we don't want them to be. Here's a dental estimate, and you can spend the next year or so saving up because I know this is a big-cost procedure.’ That kind of thing can be helpful.”



Chew sticks and dental toys can help clients keep their pets' clean between checkups and cleanings.

When it comes to talking to clients about dental care, don't give up, Ruicker says.

“I often discuss realistically when a dental cleaning under anesthesia needs to occur, but also discuss dental care at home. Also, advocating for dental care at each visit can show clients how important dental care is since we are discussing this at every visit.” ●

*Kim Campbell Thornton is a frequent and longtime contributor to Veterinary Practice News. She is a Southern California-based freelance writer who specializes in pet-related topics.*

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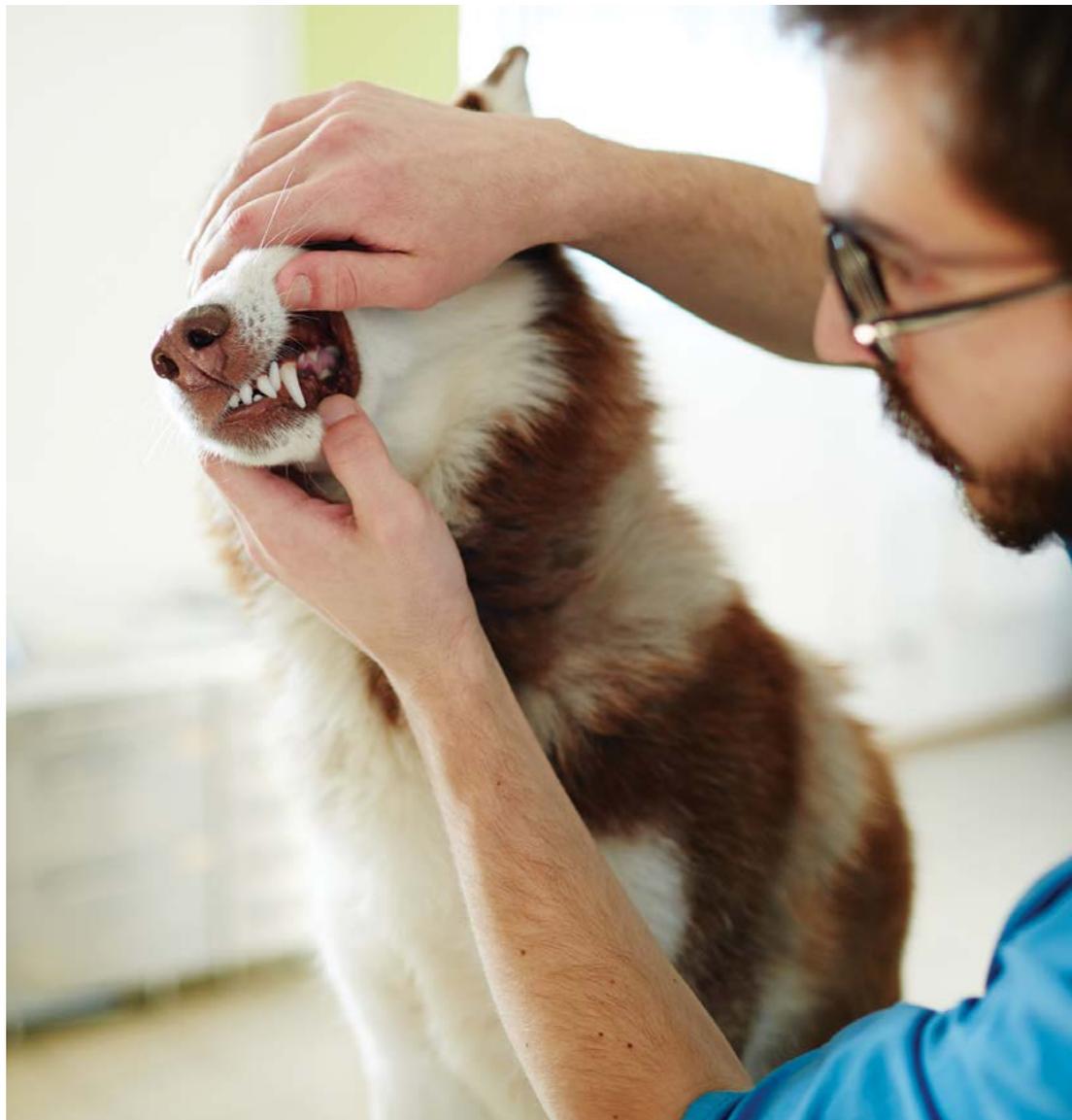
**It isn't pleasant, but it's true:** Periodontal disease is the most prevalent disease in companion animals, with some form of oral disease present in **80% of dogs** and **70% of cats**.<sup>1,2</sup>

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## Education key when talking to clients about dentistry for their pets

Historically, pets may not have gotten dental care but we now know how important oral health is to the patient's wellbeing and longevity

By Audrey Pavia

**V**eterinarians know the importance of regular dental care for pets. Keeping a dog or cat's mouth in good shape is vital to the overall health of the pet. But how can you convince your clients of this, especially when the annual cost of prophylaxis dental care can hit them hard in the wallet?

Veterinarians who specialize in treating canine and feline teeth have found ways to help owners understand the importance of dental care for pets—and have even found ways to help them afford it.

According to the American Veterinary Dental College (AVDC) Advocacy Committee, cost is a significant reason clients resist providing preventive dental care for their pets. Professional dental cleaning requires proper preanesthetic evaluation, anesthesia, and diagnostics like dental radiographs.

Oral surgery, endodontic, and restorative treatments are additional treatments sometimes indicated in patients. The need for these treatments is found during diagnostics like charting and dental radiographs during a professional dental cleaning. And now, advanced imaging like CBCT is increasingly recommended to further ensure an accurate diagnosis. All these pieces are part of the professional dental care cost, according to the AVDC, and all are vital to the success of the treatment and the health of the patient.

Mary Berg, BS, LATG, RVT, VTS (dentistry), at Beyond the Crown Veterinary Education in Lawrence, Kan., believes clients would be willing to spend the money for preventive dental care if they understood its value.

“Many veterinary professionals think the main reason clients resist preventive dental care is cost, but in reality, it is due to a lack of understanding of the importance of good oral health for the pet,” she says. “Historically, pets may not have gotten dental care and the veterinarians didn’t talk about it, but we now know how important oral health is to the patient’s wellbeing and longevity. As veterinary professionals, we need to do a better job of communicating the importance of the oral cavity and explaining why preventive care is vital.”

Dr. Ian Sandler, CEO of Grey Wolf Animal Health in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and a member of the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association’s (CVMA’s) National Issues Committee, also finds education is crucial when it comes to convincing clients to provide pets with preventive dental care.

“We haven’t done a great job at educating pet parents about the importance of routine dental care and prophylaxis,” he says. “They are only aware of their pet’s teeth when the mouth gets really bad. Then the conversation becomes, ‘Can we preserve the teeth?’ The discussion should happen sooner. If they are nervous about their pet losing teeth or being uncomfortable, regular prevention is needed so the pet won’t have to go through this.”

According to the AVDC, the problem also lies with a lack of adequate dentistry education for some veterinarians. They note the AVDC just celebrated its 25th anniversary one year ago, so awareness of oral disease is new to the field of veterinary medicine.

Not all veterinarians receive adequate training in oral disease and treatment, so client education is sometimes lacking. The AVDC does note oral disease in veterinary patients is increasingly being addressed and discussed more each year, and education of both veterinarians and the public is improving.

### Overcoming objections

The cost of a dental cleaning can seem daunting to many pet owners, even if they understand the importance. Offering a wellness plan that includes yearly dental cleaning, as well as exams and vaccinations, can make this type of care more affordable.

“Many clinics have wellness plans, usually offering several services,” Dr. Sandler says. “Certain services can be included in the plan, and provide many advantages, including dental cleanings. The consumer pays a monthly fee for the plan, as opposed to one lump sum when it’s time for a dental.”

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Helping clients understand the importance of preventive dental care is crucial, even when making the care more affordable through a wellness plan.

“Overcoming objections can be difficult, but education and sharing success stories can make a big difference,” says Berg. “I also recommend using photos of potential or similar pathology the pet may have so the owner can really see what is happening.”

Berg also suggests using terms that mean something to the client.

“Periodontal disease is a painful infection,” she says. “Most people understand ‘pain’ and ‘infection.’ Explaining that dental disease can lead to systemic problems for the pet can also help. I always compare dental issues in animals to what humans may have experienced. Plaque and calculus forms in dogs and cats just as it forms in humans. This may help the pet owner better understand why prevention is so important.”

Berg also recommends veterinary staff use firm language when talking to clients about dental care.

“Don’t say, ‘The doctor recommends a professional dental cleaning,’” she says. “A recommendation is just a suggestion. Instead say, ‘Your pet needs a professional dental cleaning.’ Replace ‘should’ with ‘need’ and ‘could’ with ‘must.’ Changing your words can help the owner understand this is important and needs to be taken care of soon. Saying, ‘The pet needs to have a professional dental cleaning, and it must be scheduled soon to prevent the infection from getting worse and risking tooth loss and systemic health problems’ will increase the likelihood of compliance.”

Sandler points out education of pet parents about the importance of prophylaxis dental care should start when they first get their pet.

“When pups and kittens first come in, we don’t always do a good job talking about the importance of this,” he says. “We should be discussing with them what will be the pet’s routine dental plan going forward.”

When discussing a pet’s health, Sandler recommends making a direct correlation between what happens to a pet’s oral care if left uncared for and how this can affect the pet’s body.

“The mouth can be a major reservoir of bacteria that can affect not only the gums and teeth, but also the rest of the body,” he says.

### Home care

Sandler also recommends educating owners about preventive dental care at home.

“Encourage pet parents to feed a dental diet that has higher carbohydrate matrix to help remove some scale and plaque building on teeth,” he says. “When pets chew these foods,



Photo © Getty Images

Wellness plans can help with client compliance in getting dental care for their pets—it takes the sting out of getting a huge bill at once.

which are harder than regular kibble, it performs a mechanical cleaning. They work very well to remove dental plaque.”

The AVDC also recommends encouraging owners to maintain a homecare regimen, even though it is time consuming, and can be challenging. The group points out pets are like toddlers: they require patience, routine, positive reinforcement, and daily care—including daily oral homecare. Veterinarians need to provide the education to clients on what that entails: daily tooth-brushing, appropriate chew toys, and various other oral homecare products as shown on the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) website at [www.VOHC.org](http://www.VOHC.org). ●

*Audrey Pavia is an award-winning freelance writer who specializes in pet and veterinary topics. She lives in Southern California with a menagerie of dogs, cats, and horses.*



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# ‘Doggy breath’ may point to bigger health concerns

Veterinarians should talk to clients about signs of periodontal disease that might lead to larger issues, AVMA says

By Samantha Ashenhurst

Photo © Getty Images



**W**hile dogs and cats are unlikely to have especially “fresh” breath, the presence of a particularly sour odor in a pet’s mouth might indicate internal illness. This is according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). To help promote the importance of oral health care for pets, the association sponsors National Pet Dental Health Month throughout February. As such, AVMA is reminding veterinarians of dental-related signs of disease in pets that may be overlooked by owners.

Bad breath, for example, could signify a serious health risk with the potential to damage not only an animal’s teeth and gums, but its internal organs as well. Other indicators include a change in eating or chewing habits, pawing at the face and mouth, and depression.

According to the American Veterinary Dental College (AVDC), most dogs and cats have some evidence of periodontal disease by the age of three. While daily tooth brushing is advised, a study published in the *Journal of Veterinary Dentistry* showed only two percent of dog owners follow through with this practice, AVMA reports. Further, a survey of pet owners revealed only 14 percent of dogs and nine percent of cats receive dental care at the veterinarian’s office.

Regular dental exams are an integral and primary component of a pet’s overall health care, says AVMA’s president, Douglas Kratt, DVM. Further, these checks can help in the detection and prevention of major health issues.

“Oral disease is the most frequently diagnosed health problem for our pets,” he says. “In addition to causing receding gums, tooth loss, and often significant pain, bacteria in the mouth can enter the bloodstream, potentially affecting the heart, liver, and kidneys, which can be life threatening.” •

Samantha Ashenhurst is a long-time dog owner and the associate editor of Veterinary Practice News, and Veterinary Practice News Canada.

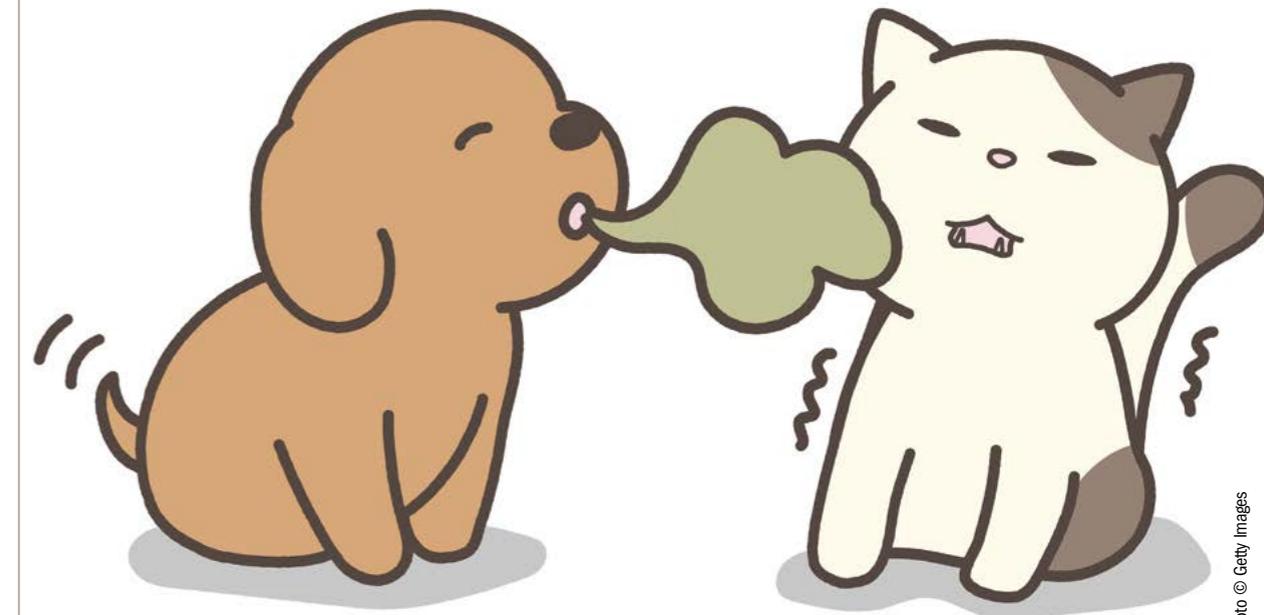


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“A survey of pet owners revealed only 14 percent of dogs and nine percent of cats receive dental care at the veterinarian’s office.”



A photograph of two small, scruffy dogs, possibly Yorkshire Terriers, sitting inside two gift boxes. The gift boxes are wrapped in colorful, vertically striped paper. One box is open, and the other is closed with a large, bright orange ribbon bow. The scene is set against a white, crinkled paper background.

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