

Brushing Your Pet's Teeth

We all take brushing our teeth several times per day for granted, but our pets may go a lifetime without ever having their teeth brushed. If introduced gradually, brushing your pet's teeth may actually become a pleasant experience for your pet.

Brushing will help prevent the accumulation of plaque and tartar on the gums and teeth. If ignored, this build-up leads to periodontal disease and eventually abscesses can form. Periodontal infections and abscesses are very painful and unfortunately, your pet cannot tell you that he or she has a "toothache". Most pets must just live with the pain until the owner becomes aware that there is a problem. Foul odor, drooling, facial swellings and/or difficulty eating are symptoms of dental disease. Recent studies indicate that infections in the mouth can release bacteria and toxins into the bloodstream, which may be associated with heart, liver, lung and kidney disease in pets.



To begin a tooth brushing program, first purchase a toothbrush that fits your pet's mouth. Special toothbrushes for dogs and cats are available from your veterinarian, or you may use an ultra-soft child's toothbrush. Also, purchase toothpaste designed for use on pets. These toothpastes are safe for use in dogs and cats and are often flavored to make brushing a positive experience for your pet. Some of the veterinary products also contain enzymes that help break down any plaque accumulation on the teeth. Human toothpaste can cause stomach upset because it is not designed to be swallowed.

If your pet has a sensitive mouth, start by handling your pet's mouth on a daily basis. Gently lift the lips and rub the teeth and gums with your fingers, moist gauze or a soft cloth. If your pet is comfortable with this, introduce the toothbrush and toothpaste. Apply a small amount of toothpaste to the brush and offer it to your pet to taste. You may have to do this for several days to get your pet comfortable with the procedure. Then start using the toothbrush and toothpaste on the front teeth, letting your pet lick the brush as you go. Use a circular motion on the surface of the tooth itself, directing the main part of the stroke away from the gum line. If your pet tolerates this well, gradually work your way around to the sides and back of the mouth. Dogs and cats rarely get significant tartar build-up on the inside surfaces of their teeth, so concentrate on the outside surfaces. It is, however, important to get the toothbrush to the back teeth, as these are the teeth that often have the worst plaque accumulation. When you have finished

brushing the teeth in both the upper and lower jaws, reward your pet with a small treat or a favorite toy.

In order for tooth brushing to be effective, try to establish a routine of brushing your pet's teeth every day. If you are having problems brushing your pet's teeth at home, contact one of our dental technicians who will be happy to give you additional advice.

In addition to tooth brushing, there are many products available to help keep your pet's teeth clean. In general, a diet of dry food is better for your pet's teeth than canned food. Several diets promote dental health, but the only diet currently available that will actually help to remove accumulated tartar is Hill's Prescription diet t/d. Ask your veterinary staff for information on this diet and other dental products.

Chew toys and treats are also helpful. These are not a substitute for regular brushing, and some treats have a high fat content, so be sure to adjust your pet's diet accordingly. Make sure that chew toys cannot harm your pet when chewed on or if swallowed.

A general rule of thumb is that if you cannot bend or indent the object, then it is too hard for your pet to chew on and may chip or fracture the teeth. Always supervise your pet when chewing on toys or treats.

If your pet suddenly objects to tooth brushing or rejects his or her normal diet or treats, contact us to schedule a check up, as this could be an early sign of a dental problem.

Good dental care will help maintain your pet's overall health, comfort and happiness for many years to come.