

Pet Owner's Guide to Tooth Brushing

When to start tooth brushing:

Only begin tooth brushing after a thorough dental exam has been performed by a veterinarian to determine that the teeth are healthy. Brushing an animal's teeth when they have periodontal disease, cavities, tooth fractures, or other abnormalities is painful to the pet and makes it likely that they will not tolerate the process. Wait 1-2 weeks following a dental cleaning to start tooth brushing to allow the mouth to heal. Puppies and kittens should begin tooth brush training as soon as they have teeth to get them used to the process early on. Stop tooth brushing when the puppy/kitten starts losing its baby teeth (brushing at this time may cause discomfort as the mouth is tender), and resume once the adult teeth are in.

Tooth brushing and other home care techniques are used to PREVENT dental disease, NOT to treat it. Pets with established, untreated dental disease require a professional exam and full dental cleaning while under anesthesia to treat the condition. Tooth brushing in these animals should be started only AFTER this professional care is performed. Tooth brushing is not a substitute for regular dental exams and professional cleanings. Animals that are genetically predisposed to do so will still eventually develop dental disease, though regular tooth brushing does delay and slow the progression of the disease.

Tooth Brushing Overview:

- Regular tooth brushing is the best way to get rid of the plaque that causes dental disease.
- Brushing 3 times a week is adequate to maintain healthy teeth and gums, though daily brushing is better.
- Daily brushing (twice daily if you are able) is needed to control existing gingivitis (gum inflammation).
- Use a small soft-bristled toothbrush, or finger brush for smaller pets.
- Toothpaste is optional. Studies have shown that brushing without toothpaste is 98% as effective as brushing with toothpaste. This means the mechanical action of the toothbrush does almost all of the work. In some animals, the flavored toothpastes serve as positive reinforcement. In others, they are so busy trying to lick the toothpaste, it only serves as a distraction.
- Never use human toothpastes. They contain xylitol and sudsing agents that should not be swallowed. Baking soda and hydrogen peroxide products are also not recommended.

How to start tooth brushing:

Consistency is important. Have the same person perform the training at the same time in the same location every day. Every step must be positive for the animal. After each training/brushing session, the pet is given a reward (food, play, cuddles...whatever the pet is most motivated by). This is not a race. The animal sets the pace and determines how long is spent on each step before moving on to the next. If you try to progress too fast and evoke a negative response from the pet, that is what the pet remembers the next night. It is far better to go too slow than to go too fast. If done correctly, many animals come to enjoy tooth brushing. Many owners claim their pets will not let them skip a day as they do not want to miss the attention and treats.

Step 1: Have the animal sit quietly while you stroke under the chin and lower jaw, using lots of gentle praise. After 10 seconds or so, the pet is given a reward (food treat). Each day, try to increase the amount of time the animal sits quietly having its lower jaw massaged before getting a reward.

Step 2: When the animal is happy to sit for 30 seconds or so, start working on stroking and massaging the upper jaw as well. Go slowly as animals are naturally very protective of their eyes.

Step 3: Gently and casually start manipulating the lips, pushing the upper lip up, retracting the corners of the mouth back, and the lower lip down. This should be done without pulling on the whiskers or pinching the lips.

Step 4: After a few days of this, it should be possible to slip a finger (one without long nails) inside the mouth to start gently rubbing the teeth. Start with the front teeth and gradually work farther back in the mouth to massage the back teeth. It is not necessary to open the mouth or even lift the lips for this – it can all be done by feel.

Step 5: When the pet is comfortable accepting a naked finger rubbing along the teeth, the finger can be wrapped in a wash cloth, gauze sponge or a piece of panty hose. The covered finger is again used to massage the teeth and gums, starting with the front teeth and day-by-day moving to the back teeth.

Step 6: If toothpaste is going to be used, now is the time to introduce it. Put some paste on the end of a finger and offer it to the pet. If the animal likes the paste, try using it on your covered finger.

Step 7: Introduce the toothbrush. With a forefinger guarding the end of the brush, it is slipped into the cheek pouch under the upper lip and gently rubbed back and forth along the upper teeth at the gum line. Start with the front teeth and gradually work to the back of the mouth. Hold the toothbrush at a 45 degree angle to the teeth at the gum line and move in a circular motion (see picture). Do not brush too hard. Practice on a ripe tomato - brush just hard enough to dent the skin but not hard enough to tear it. If the animal chews on the bristles of the brush, it is not necessarily a bad thing.

Step 8: Once the animal accepts having the upper teeth brushed, start working on the lower teeth. If the animal will allow you to brush the inner aspect of the teeth, great. If not, only brush the outside. The tongue does a fairly good job cleaning the insides.

