

## Oral Hygiene and Your Dog or Cat

Pets are just as susceptible to problems with their teeth and gums as humans are. Like humans, there is a genetic component to the types of problems that can develop. All cats and small breeds of dogs are particularly prone to problems. Many, such as Pekinese and Pugs, have shortened jaws, crowding their teeth and leading to tartar build up, then gum disease. Toy breeds often retain some puppy teeth, again leading to crowding, tartar build up, and gum disease. Cats develop calculus and gum infections, too, but they are also prone to resorptive lesions. These are like cavities, with holes developing in the teeth. The defects can be above the gum line or below it. The condition is painful, but pain is usually not enough to cause a cat to stop eating. Weight loss, subtle behavior changes, chewing on just one side, grinding the teeth, or having teeth fall out can all be signs of dental disease in cats.

Though small dogs and all cats are the patients that we most commonly treat for oral disease, that doesn't mean medium and large breed dogs are immune. Greyhounds, for example, tend to have terrible teeth. Any breed can develop gum infections and bad breath, especially as they age.

Why is this so important? Well, for one thing, tartar and gum disease both lead to bad breath, and if your little buddy has bad breath, you might be reluctant to allow your friend to sleep next to you on your pillow or give you "kisses". Tartar build up can lead to exposure of the tooth roots, where the nerves are located, creating a very painful condition. As a veterinarian, I have often had owners tell me that they never realized their pet was ill or in pain until after the dentistry, when suddenly he or she was acting like a puppy or kitten again.

The most important reason to keep your pet's mouth free of infection is general health. As your own dentist or dental hygienist has undoubtedly told you, infections in the gums can allow bacteria to enter the bloodstream, leading to infections anywhere in the body. Infections of tooth roots are common, and can lead to swelling in the face that is so severe that the eye will be forced closed. Infections of the liver, heart, and kidneys are also possible, and could be life-threatening.

There are many, many options available for keeping your pet's teeth clean and gums healthy. Veterinary dentists stress brushing pets' teeth DAILY. Although this is not possible for many people, having it in mind as a goal means you are more likely to get to it at least once a week. Trust me, this does make a big difference. I examine pets' mouths at every routine 'wellness' exam, and many times I've commented on how beautiful an animal's mouth is only to have the owner exclaim, "It should be! I brush her teeth religiously!"

I realize that brushing a pet's teeth for the first time can be a daunting task. I've heard many experts give advice about how to get your pet used to this, but in general the principal all experts apply is: go slow. Start with something soft, like a toothbrush made for human babies, a piece of gauze, or even (if you are sure your pet won't be so offended it bites you!) your finger. Get whatever you are using wet, then allow your pet the chance to smell and lick it, so they know it is not a threat. Then gently rub their gums. If they pull away, don't fight it, just try again later. Combine this with lots of petting and soothing words, and gradually you will be able to extend the amount of time you spend 'brushing'.

Once your pet has accepted the sensation of something rubbing along their teeth and gums, try adding a toothpaste or gel. Veterinary dentists recommend avoiding products containing fluoride, baking soda, or hydrogen peroxide, because animals tend to swallow whatever goes in their mouth, not spit, and these things can make them vomit. Most pets also do not like the taste of mint or cinnamon, so finding a malt or chicken flavored paste that is made for pets is best. I have heard alternative medicine veterinarians even recommend making a paste by powdering vitamin C tablets and mixing them with water, because vitamin C is a powerful antioxidant and immune system stimulator. This makes sense to me, because the purpose of brushing is not

only to physically remove plaque and bacteria, it is also to stimulate the immune system in the gums by increasing blood flow.

If your pet absolutely will not allow you to brush its teeth, or it is not possible for some other reason, there are other alternatives available. While these are not ideal, they are certainly preferable to doing nothing! There are many products out on the market today that claim to either decrease tartar buildup or kill oral bacteria. However, there is no regulatory committee checking to see if the claims made by a company have been tested, or if they are just a marketing gimmick. One easy way to avoid wasting your money on a product is to check the [VOHC Approved List](#). VOHC stands for Veterinary Oral Health Council. In short, it is a non-profit organization that looks at studies that a company has done to see if there is actual proof that the claims being made are true. If they are, that product gets the VOHC seal of approval.

It is quite common for pets to require at least one professional cleaning in their lifetime, and some may need regular dentistry performed twice a year, no matter what you are doing at home! Currently veterinarians perform dentistry on pets under general anesthesia, even if no teeth need to be removed. This allows us to examine the teeth thoroughly, remove all tartar and plaque, x-ray the teeth to look for pathology below the gum line, remove or repair teeth as needed, and polish the teeth. Although general anesthesia always carries risks, these risks are minimized to almost zero by taking proper precautions, such as: having pre-anesthetic blood work done to assess the liver and kidneys; having IV fluids delivered during the procedure to keep the blood pressure up; careful monitoring of all vital signs; tracheal intubation to provide respiratory support if needed (as well as supplying gas anesthetics); minimizing anesthesia time; and proper monitoring during the recovery period. If you have any doubts about this procedure, consult a specialty practice or veterinary medical teaching hospital. These facilities often have board-certified anesthesiologists on hand, ensuring that your pet receives exactly the kind of care you would if you were undergoing surgery.

Though most of us don't often get to see our pets' teeth, keeping those pearly whites healthy is an important aspect of providing the best possible care for your four-legged family member!