

Home Dental Care for Dogs

**Why should I brush my dog's teeth?**

Daily removal of plaque is the key to an effective oral hygiene program. Unless your dog’s teeth are brushed daily, plaque will build up at the gum line. Eventually, calculus forms and further irritates the gums, while infection progresses to loosen and destroy the attachment of the tooth. In addition to loose teeth, infection under the gum line can spread to the liver, kidneys and heart.

**How can I brush my dog’s teeth?**

Brushing a dog's teeth can be an easy and fun procedure, if approached in an upbeat manner. First, pick a soft-bristled or finger toothbrush. A bristled toothbrush made specifically for dogs is best because they are angled to easily reach the back teeth. You will also need enzymatic toothpaste from your veterinarian. Do not use human toothpaste as it contains detergents that should not be swallowed. Push the toothpaste down in between the bristles. This allows the paste to fully coat the teeth.

Approach your pet in a happy, gentle manner and start slowly. You can begin by using a washcloth to wipe the teeth front and back in the same manner you will be using the brush. Do this twice a day for two weeks. Pair it with something pleasant for your pet, like a treat or play session. After two weeks, you should introduce the toothbrush with only water on the bristles. Start brushing daily for several days. When your dog accepts this brushing, add the toothpaste. Ten short, back and forth motions should be performed before moving the brush to a new location. Give most of your attention to the outside surface of the upper teeth.

**How often should I have my dog’s teeth cleaned by a veterinarian?**

It depends on the degree of plaque and calculus accumulation on your dog's teeth. This is influenced by three factors: genetics, diet and home care.

Examine your pet’s teeth monthly. Look for an accumulation of yellow or brown material at the area where the tooth meets the gum line, especially over the canine and cheek teeth.

Bacteria are associated with plaque and produce substances that irritate the gum tissues. When treated, this inflammation will resolve. Mild gingivitis may respond well to home oral care, but moderate and severe gingivitis will require cleaning below the gum line under anesthesia.

When gingivitis is left untreated, it will progress to periodontal disease, which is non-curable but can be managed with intensive care at home and intermittent dental cleanings under anesthesia. Intervals between teeth cleaning procedures will depend on how often you can brush the teeth at home. If you cannot brush at home, your pet may require multiple cleanings per year.

**What is best to feed my dog?**

Hard, dry food will help remove plaque from the teeth. For owners who cannot brush or for animals that have a tendency to build plaque quickly, several diets are approved by the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) to help keep dogs and cat’s teeth clean. These include Hills Prescription Diet Canine t/d, or Science Diet Oral Care. CET chews are also recommended by veterinary dentists and have been shown to be beneficial, though no controlled studies have been performed. CET toothpastes and chews contain enzymes that help kill the bacteria associated with plaque.

**Which toys should I avoid to protect my pet’s teeth?**

Chewing on objects harder than the tooth may lead to dental fractures. We do not recommend cow or horse hooves, ice cubes, rocks, Nylabones, or real cow bones. These items commonly cause fractures of the upper premolars. Tug-of-war games should not be played, especially in young dogs, to avoid moving the growing teeth into abnormal locations. Throwing your dog a Frisbee can also cause trauma to the teeth, resulting in pulpitis (inflammation of the pulp).

Toys that seldom cause harm to teeth include hard rubber/silicone balls and toys (like Kongs) and any stuffed cloth toys or pull toys. Any toys or treats that can be chewed or pulled apart (like Cheweez, Greenies, rawhide, stuffed toys or soft rubber toys) should be given only under supervision. Ingesting large pieces of these can cause intestinal upset or blockage.

**When do I have to start worrying about dental problems with my dog?**

As soon as puppy teeth emerge, it is time to start brushing. Although these teeth will eventually be replaced, an early introduction to brushing will make home dental care easy for the rest of the dog's life.

If you are having difficulty cleaning your dog’s teeth at home, please contact our office at (706) 546-7879.