

# Cleaning Your Pet's Teeth, Step-by-Step

Have a dog or cat who won't let you near her mouth, much less brush his pearly whites? Here's how to get started, along with some of the biggest mistakes to avoid.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- By the age of 3, most pets already have early evidence of periodontal disease, which is caused by an accumulation of dental plaque and tartar on the teeth
- An optimal diet and daily brushing will go a long way toward keeping your pet's oral health in good standing
- Start by desensitizing your pet to having their mouths touched. Once your pet is OK with having his face and gums massaged, move on to touching his teeth
- The next step is to wrap a bit of gauze around your finger and lightly rub it over your dog's teeth and gums, gradually focusing on one tooth at a time
- Gradually transition to a finger brush and then a soft pet toothbrush that's the right size for his mouth
- An enzymatic tooth solution designed for pets can also be used to help break down the plaque and tartar on the surface of teeth

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Teeth brushing shouldn't be reserved for humans. Dogs (and cats) benefit from it too. A common belief is that since wild animals don't brush their teeth, pet dogs don't need to either. This is false for a few reasons. First, most dogs are not eating their ancestral diet of fresh, species-appropriate foods and appropriate raw bones. This predisposes them to problems with their teeth and oral health.

Even if your dog is eating a pristine, nutritionally optimal diet, however, many will still accumulate plaque and tartar on their teeth — especially if you're not regularly brushing and receiving oral care from a veterinarian. That said, chewing raw meat and bones does act as a type of natural toothbrush and dental floss, which can dramatically reduce how quickly tartar accumulates in your pet's mouth.

Recreational raw bones and/or a fully digestible, high quality dental dog chew can also help control plaque and tartar, regardless of your pup's diet. What does not "clean" your dog's teeth — contrary to what you may have heard — is crunching on dry kibble or Milk Bones.

## Why Keeping Your Dog's Teeth Clean Matters

By the age of 3, most pets already have early evidence of periodontal disease, which is caused by an accumulation of dental plaque and tartar on the teeth. Without regular teeth brushing, tartar will form on your pet's teeth within only a few days' time.<sup>1</sup>

Dental plaque contains bacteria that can irritate gum tissue, and tartar accumulates on the tooth's surface, allowing plaque accumulation to accelerate further. Once it gets below the gumline, plaque and tartar can lead to infection or damage to the jawbone and surrounding tissues.

Left untreated, periodontal disease can progress into bacterial infection and systemic health problems including damage to the kidneys, heart and liver.<sup>2</sup> Further, periodontal disease is a painful condition that can cause complications such as abscesses, infections, loose teeth and bone loss. Your dog could be suffering without you knowing it, as they often go on with business as usual even when their mouth is hurting.<sup>3</sup>

Signs of dental disease in pets include an accumulation of brown or greenish plaque and tartar on the teeth, along with red gums. You may also notice your dog chewing on one side of the mouth, dropping food, running away from the food dish, crying when yawning, hiding, not grooming themselves and acting irritable.

If your dog has diabetes, it's especially important to keep close tabs on their teeth. Dogs with diabetes are prone to infections because high blood sugar levels may weaken the immune system. Nerve damage and reductions in blood flow that can occur due to diabetes may also increase the risk of infections, including in the mouth.

At the same time, untreated periodontal disease can make glycemic control more difficult, while hormones released as a result can lead to insulin resistance and hyperglycemia.<sup>4</sup>

## Daily Teeth Brushing Will Keep Your Pet's Pearly Whites Clean

The process of brushing a cat's teeth is much the same for a dog. The first step is getting your pet used to having their mouth touched. Desensitizing your pet to having their face and mouth touched is the most important step to safe brushing with minimal stress.

If you have a puppy, this is the ideal time to get your pup used to having his mouth gently touched as part of his daily routine. Young dogs are often receptive to daily brushing, but even older pets can warm up to it if you start gradually and make brushing a daily, fear-free routine.

Don't make the mistake of jumping right in with a toothbrush, which could make your dog fearful of brushing. Instead, start with a face/gum massage with your hand. Go at a pace that doesn't create stress and stop before your pet becomes nervous. Once your pet is OK with having his face and gums massaged, move on to touching his teeth.

The next step is to wrap a bit of gauze around your finger and lightly rub it over your dog's teeth and gums, gradually focusing on one tooth at a time, then transitioning to a finger brush and then a soft pet toothbrush that's the right size for his mouth. An enzymatic tooth solution designed for pets can also be used to help break down the plaque and tartar on the surface of teeth.

Remember that every dog will adjust to having his teeth brushed at his own pace. Don't force the progression, and keep the initial sessions brief and positive. Stay with it if your dog is hesitant, as even older dogs usually learn to accept daily brushing. While a once-a-day brushing is ideal — especially for older pets — any amount of brushing is better than none. Even teeth brushing done a few times a week will be beneficial.

## **Professional Teeth Cleaning May Also Be Necessary**

An optimal diet and daily brushing will go a long way toward keeping your pet's oral health in good standing. For additional oral health support, supplements such as ubiquinol can help improve oral defenses and slow the rate of degeneration.

However, many pets also require professional dental exams and cleanings to maintain a healthy mouth. Regular oral exams are an important part of your dog's annual (or semi-annual) wellness visit. Your veterinarian should alert you at that time if a professional teeth cleaning is necessary.

You can also conduct at-home mouth inspections between visits, looking for loose or discolored teeth and discoloration along the gumline. If you notice anything unusual — or if your dog has unusually bad breath — take action to clean up your dog's teeth. If he isn't in pain already due to poor oral health, you can assume that, without intervention, he soon will be.

### **Sources and References**

<sup>1,2</sup> [Veterinary Oral Health Council, Consequences of Periodontal Disease](#)

<sup>3</sup> [PetMD December 2, 2019](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Veterinary Practice News August 16, 2018](#)