

Brushing Your Dog's Teeth

Why should I brush my dog's teeth?

It is estimated that over 80% of dogs over the age of three have periodontal disease, an inflammation or infection of the tissues surrounding the teeth.

Periodontal disease starts as gingivitis caused by plaque and often progresses to involve the bony tooth sockets. Plaque is an accumulation of bacteria that begins to accumulate on the teeth within hours after a meal or even after a professional tooth cleaning. Within a day, plaque combines with minerals in the saliva to become tartar, also known as calculus.



Left untreated, periodontal disease can lead to painful tooth loss. See the handout "Dental Disease in Dogs" for more information about periodontal disease.

When should I brush my dog's teeth?

Like us, it is best to brush your dog's teeth at least twice every day. For many dogs, once brushing becomes a part of their daily routine, they will begin to expect and enjoy it. Brushing three times a week is the minimum recommendation to help remove plaque and prevent tartar accumulation.

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It is best to teach your dog to accept tooth brushing while he is still a puppy. If you have an older dog, the training process may take a little longer, but it is still worth the effort.

What steps should I follow to teach my dog to accept tooth brushing?

To be successful at brushing your dog's teeth, you must make it a positive experience for both of you. Make the experience positive by praising your dog throughout the whole procedure, with reassurance through every step. For the best results, follow these steps:

- Choose a quiet time and place to begin.
- If your dog is small enough, hold your dog securely in your lap with his head facing away from you. If your dog is larger, sit on a chair and have your dog sit beside you so that you can comfortably handle his mouth and teeth.
- Start by rubbing your finger or a soft cloth over the outer surfaces of your dog's teeth, using a back-and-forth motion, focusing on the area where the gum touches the tooth surface. Stay on the outside surfaces of the teeth to avoid being accidentally bitten. For the first few lessons, it is a good idea to rub the cloth along only a few teeth rather than the whole mouth, especially if your pet is unsure or nervous about the process.
- Once your dog is comfortable with you rubbing his teeth, let him taste a little bit of pet toothpaste from your finger. Do not use human toothpaste – it is not formulated to be swallowed.
- Once your dog has accepted the taste of pet toothpaste, apply a small amount to the cloth and rub it over the teeth.

- Once your dog is used to you rubbing his teeth with a cloth, it's time to start using a toothbrush.

What type of toothbrush should I use?

Commercial toothbrushes are available that are specifically designed for use in dogs. These include:

- brushes with angled handles,
- brushes with multiple heads (so that you can simultaneously brush the inside, outside, and top surfaces of the tooth),
- small brushes that fit comfortably in your hand, and
- finger toothbrushes (designed to fit over the tip of your finger).

For some dogs, it is acceptable to use a very soft toothbrush designed for use in human babies.

The type of toothbrush you use depends on the size of your dog and on your own dexterity. Many pet owners find it easier to use a finger brush, especially when just beginning to brush their dog's teeth. Check with your veterinarian if you are uncertain of which brush to use.

Regardless of the type of toothbrush you use, it is important to be gentle and go slowly, as it is easy to accidentally poke the tip of the toothbrush against the gums and cause some irritation.

Is it okay to use human toothpaste?

No. Human toothpastes contain ingredients that should not be swallowed. If it is swallowed, it can cause an upset stomach or digestive disturbances. Some human toothpastes contain high levels of sodium which may even make your pet ill, while others may contain xylitol (artificial sweetener), which is toxic for dogs.

My friend recommended that I use baking soda. Is this okay?

No. Baking soda has a high alkaline content and if swallowed, it can upset the acid balance in the stomach and digestive tract. Also, baking soda doesn't taste good, which may cause your dog to be uncooperative when you try to brush his teeth.

Why is pet toothpaste recommended?

Pet toothpaste is available in several different flavors that are appetizing to dogs, including poultry, beef, malt, and mint. By using a product that tastes good, your dog will be more likely to enjoy the whole experience. A list of dental products that have been accepted by the Veterinary Oral Health Counsel can be found at vohc.org.

Exactly how should I brush my dog's teeth?

Follow these steps for a successful tooth brushing session.

- Apply a small amount of toothpaste to the toothbrush. Gently raise your dog's lips on one side of his mouth either by pushing up on the lip with the index finger of your free hand, or by placing your free hand over your dog's head with your thumb and index finger on opposite sides of your dog's upper jaw to lift his lips.
- To brush the lower teeth, you will need to open your dog's mouth a little. Do this by gently tilting your dog's head backward while holding onto his upper jaw with the thumb and index finger of your free hand.



- At first, concentrate on brushing the large cheek teeth and the canine teeth, the teeth where plaque and tartar accumulate most quickly. Gradually work up to brushing all of the teeth (this will probably take several days or weeks).
- Do not worry about brushing the tips or insides of the teeth unless your dog is very cooperative. Most periodontal damage occurs on the outer surfaces of the teeth and this is where you should direct your efforts. In addition, the dog's tongue tends to remove a lot of the plaque from the inner surfaces of the teeth, reducing the need for brushing these surfaces.

How long should I spend brushing my dog's teeth?

Try to brush for approximately 30 seconds per side.

Is there anything else I should know?

Yes. A dog's mouth contains lots of bacteria. If possible, wear gloves while brushing your dog's teeth. If this limits your ability to effectively brush his teeth, then be sure to thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water after you are finished. Also, rinse the toothbrush thoroughly before putting it away. Replace the toothbrush every three months, and if you have several dogs, use a different toothbrush for each of them.