

ORAL HEALTH CARE IN PETS

Why practice preventive oral health care?

- **Brushing your pet's teeth is the single most important thing you can do to maintain your pet's oral health**, and it's easy if you teach it right and go at your pet's pace.
- **Preventative care saves you money** – the slower dental disease progresses, the less frequently your pet will need veterinary intervention, such as dental cleanings and tooth removal.

How to introduce tooth brushing:

- It's all about introducing brushing in slow steps, rewarding each phase so your pet associates brushing with good things, and never pushing your pet to the point of discomfort. The goal is for him/her (and you) to look forward to tooth-brushing time.
- **Brushing must be done AT LEAST every 2 days (ideally, daily)**, or else plaque progresses to the point where brushing won't remove it. Here's how you start:
 1. Place a bit of a **flavoured, pet-specific toothpaste** on your finger and offer it to your pet. Don't put your finger in his/her mouth just yet – let your pet lick the toothpaste off your finger like a treat. You can also spread a small amount of toothpaste on a kong toy like you might with peanut butter, and experiment with different flavours to find his/her favourite.
 2. Once your pet eagerly seeks the toothpaste, try placing some on your finger and rubbing it gently on his/her gums. Keep it to a few seconds at first, then gradually increase the amount of time and area that you cover.
 3. Next, so long as she happily accepts the previous step, place some toothpaste on a **soft-bristled baby toothbrush**, and let your pet lick it off on his/her own.
 4. Once your pet shows excitement at the sight of the toothbrush, try handling the mouth while he/she licks the toothpaste – lift lips and place a gentle hand under the jaw.
 5. Finally, you can introduce the toothbrush into your pet's mouth. As with finger brushing, start with a few seconds and gradually progress to brushing the whole mouth, concentrating on the outside surfaces of the teeth.

Troubleshooting:

- If your pet is resisting brushing, **you're moving too quickly**, or he/she doesn't like the toothpaste flavour enough. Try spending more time on previous steps, and if that doesn't help, try a different flavour. **Brushing should NEVER be a fight – if it is, it shouldn't be pursued until more training has been done.**
- Note: While some pet toothpastes may help break tartar down ("enzymatic"), most pet toothpastes primarily serve to provide a reward – it's the mechanical brushing that removes plaque. You can try adding other things like chicken broth to the toothbrush instead.

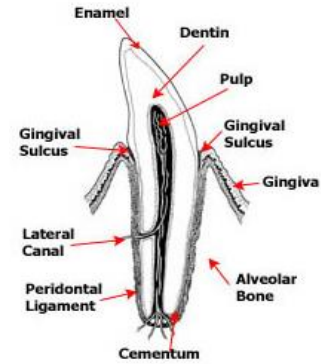
How can you tell if your pet has periodontal disease?

- **bad breath**
- red, swollen gums
- bleeding gums
- **visible plaque, calculus**
- loss of gum tissue
- movement of teeth
- difficulty eating, dropping food
- abnormal chewing
- pawing at or rubbing mouth
- **less playful, especially with toys**
- excessive drooling
- discharge from the nose or mouth
- Some pets show **no change!** *Many pets hide dental pain extremely well*

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What is **periodontal disease**?

- Periodontal disease refers to disease of the tissues in the mouth that support the teeth. This includes the **cementum** (hard coating of the part of the tooth under the gumline), the **periodontal ligament** (the structure that attaches the tooth to the bone of the jaw), the **alveolar bone** of the jaw, and the **gingiva** (gums).



What causes this condition?

- Periodontal disease results from “**plaque**” build-up on the tooth’s surface, which then affects nearby structures. Plaque is comprised of many things, including elements from the saliva called glycoproteins, bits of food, bacteria, and the harmful products made by bacteria. It can exist not only over the part of the tooth you can see, but deeper under the gumline too.
- If left on the teeth for approximately 2 days, plaque will mineralize (become harder), progressing to “**calculus**” (tartar). This material acts as a **local irritant to adjacent tissues, protects deeper plaque, maintains an oxygen-free environment that bad mouth bacteria love**, and can **prevent healing of already diseased gingiva**.

What sorts of pets get periodontal disease?

- This condition is one of the most common issue we see in pets, and can arise in **all pets**. Every animal will develop some form of periodontal disease as they age, though some pets are at higher risk of developing more serious forms faster:
- Pets with **abnormal spacing or relationships between teeth** (eg. Bulldogs, Persians and other smushy-faced breeds, **small breed dogs**), which results in reduced ability for normal chewing to remove plaque off teeth
- Pets with **concurrent diseases** (eg. diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, immunosuppression)

What can happen if periodontal disease is not addressed?

- **WORSENING** of above signs and **increased pain** (even if your pet doesn’t show it)
- **loss of teeth** (either by falling out or by having to be removed)
- creation of abnormal holes between the mouth and nose or other areas of the skull (oro-nasal fistula, oro-antral fistula)
- **spreading of disease** within the tooth itself and/or to other areas of the body
- progression of painful inflammatory diseases
- **increased cost of treatment** (increased length of anesthetic, increased invasiveness, increased number of teeth needing to be removed)

What treatments are recommended?

- The most important aspect of treatment is **removal of plaque and tartar**.
- In between veterinary visits, owners can practice at-home management, including **tooth brushing**, oral antimicrobial rinses and gels, and specialized dental chews and diets ([see VOHC products for cats and dogs](#)) to remove already existing tartar and prevent further dental disease progression. Your veterinarian can help you develop a plan that works best for you and your pet.
- Often, at-home management needs to be supplemented with dental procedures at your pet’s veterinary clinic, but **proper management at home helps to reduce the number, length, invasiveness, and price of dental procedures**