



GRASS LAKE ANIMAL HOSPITAL

Caring for the pet who shares your life.

Why is Dental Care Important?

With your own teeth, what your dentist and hygienist do is only a small, though essential, part of your oral hygiene program. **You** are responsible for the daily brushing, rinsing, and flossing that are required to slow the constant progression of periodontal disease. The same is true for your pet. You are responsible for every aspect of your pet's daily care and care of the teeth becomes more important as we expect our pets to live longer and longer.

Brushing your pet's teeth is the main component of home-care. The purpose is to remove plaque for before it becomes tartar. Plaque is a slime comprised of bacteria, saliva, and food particles which adheres to the teeth and fills the pocket between the tooth and gum. Left undisturbed, plaque rapidly collects minerals from the saliva to form the rock-like brown deposits known as tartar or calculus. By brushing daily, you remove plaque and so tartar builds up slower. As with all things, the results will depend on the effort you give it.

The first step is to have your veterinarian perform a thorough oral examination to determine if there is any dental disease which needs to be treated before you start your brushing program. It would be inadvisable to start brushing your pet's teeth if there is any established dental disease as it will do no good but will cause pain to your pet.

Once the examination has been completed, your veterinarian will outline the treatment plan. If there is dental disease the plan will include a thorough cleaning of all teeth, both above and below the gum line. Any teeth that have extensive disease beyond the point of being salvageable will have to be extracted. There may well be some seriously diseased teeth which might be saved through more extensive procedures and you will need to discuss with your veterinarian what your expectations and desires are regarding the various treatment options. The only way to properly carry out dental procedures on pets is with them anesthetized. Fortunately, the drugs available today make the anesthetic risk lower than the risk of dental neglect.

Now that we have the mouth clean and healthy, it is up to you to keep it that way. As mentioned before, this is done by brushing your pet's teeth daily. Bear in mind that these are guidelines, not hard rules. Each animal is different and so the program may need to be modified to your pet's need. Some owners can start brushing their pet's teeth on the first day whereas with others, it may take weeks of gradual effort to build up to brushing. Be patient because if you try to progress too rapidly, you might make your pet mouth-shy making it very difficult to proceed. If handled properly, many animals come to truly enjoy their home-care and the extra time you spend each day with your pet will increase the bond between you.

Credit: Fraser Hale, DVM

Brushing How-To

1. When to start? **As soon as possible.** 8 to 12 weeks old is best. Pets don't need maintenance this young, but by starting when your pet is young and impressionable, they will become familiar with the routine by the time the permanent teeth erupt. It is a good idea to stop brushing while your pet is losing baby teeth as the mouth will be a bit sore and your poking around with the brush will cause more pain. Once all the permanent teeth are in you can pick up where you left off.
2. The first step is to work with your pet's mouth. With a little patience your pet will soon accept your attention. **Make it fun** for both of you. Use a lot of love and especially praise to gain their confidence. Try to have your practice sessions at the same time each day so your pet gets into a routine. Late in the evening often works well, as everyone involved is generally in a quiet mood then. If your pet is highly motivated by food, try just before dinner with the meal acting as a reward for cooperating.
3. Start by handling the muzzle and tickling the lips and soon you will be able to rub the teeth and gums with your finger. Put a few drop of water, flavored with garlic or garlic salt for dogs and tuna juice for cats, in the mouth daily. They will soon look forward to this treat.
4. Next, use a washcloth or piece of nylon sock, wrapped around the end of your finger and flavored as above, to gently rub on teeth.
5. Finally, use a soft toothbrush to brush the teeth. There are several veterinary brushes available and many human brushes are well suited to animal use as well. Brush back and forth or from gum to tip. Brushing the tongue side of the teeth is less critical. Use the garlic water or tuna juice. **Make it a game.**
6. There is an ever-growing selection of veterinary tooth washes, pastes, and gels. Your veterinarian can help you select the one best suited to your situation. These products may (or may not) increase the effectiveness of your home-care program but remember, **it's the brushing which does most of the cleaning.** Brushing should be done daily for best results. Less than 4 times a week will have little if any effect. Human toothpaste is to be avoided as it will cause stomach upset if swallowed. Baking soda, with its very high sodium content can be dangerous to older patients. Hydrogen peroxide can be too harsh for the gums and must not be swallowed.
7. It helps to give mildly abrasive foods and toys. Visit www.vohc.org for products with valid research to back their claims. Focus on products that are accepted to control plaque over those that just have a tartar claim. **Avoid natural bones, antlers, dried cow hooves and hard nylon toys and large rawhide toys as these are hard enough to fracture teeth. If you would not want me to hit you in the knee-cap with it, don't let your dog chew on it!**
8. By following a consistent program of home-care, you will greatly improve your pet's dental health. This will mean fewer professional cleanings, less tooth loss, and a happier, healthier pet. However, please remember that there is no substitute for professional veterinary care. We must work as a team to ensure a long and happy life for your pet.
9. For more information, please have a look at this paper on the website-
<http://www.toothvet.ca/PDFfiles/HomeCarePack.pdf>