

# YOUR PETS

*Good dental care means happier, healthier animals.*

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IF YOU'RE A PET OWNER, get ready for peanut-butter- and seafood-flavored toothpaste. Periodontal disease has become the most common condition seen in veterinarians' offices. Vets now advise that we take care of our pets' teeth the way we do our own: with regular brushing and professional cleanings.

**WHY CARE IS CRUCIAL** The rise in periodontal disease is in part a result of how well we treat our pets. "Animals are living longer, and periodontal disease correlates with increasing age," says Colin Harvey of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. Pet food, however nutritious, is different from what wolves

and tigers consume in the wild. Without the scraping of teeth against bones and ligaments of prey, a film of plaque forms and hardens into tartar.

The plaque and tartar are breeding grounds for bacteria. When bacteria work their way under the gum line, bad breath, sore gums, loose teeth, and (especially in small dogs) jawbone erosion can develop. If the bacteria enter the bloodstream, major organs—heart, liver, kidneys—may be affected.

**DENTAL ESSENTIALS** To prevent periodontal disease, take your pets to the vet for cleanings (under anesthesia) annually or semiannually, depending on the breed. Start at age 1 for small dogs and all cats, 2 to 4 for big dogs.

Brushing is also important, though animals' teeth are different from ours. They're pointier, with wider spaces between them, so they don't require flossing. And cavities are less common. But periodontal disease in animals is similar to the human variety.

"If you didn't brush your teeth for six months after a professional cleaning, your mouth would be a mess, and the same is true for dogs and cats," says Kevin Stepaniuk of the American Veterinary Dental Society.

Not every pet tolerates having her pearly whites brushed. ("Dogs are much easier because, well, cats are cats, right?" Stepaniuk says.) For pets that balk, the Veterinary Oral Health Council has a list of scientifically tested chews, treats, water additives, and prescription diets that can help fight plaque and tartar ([vohc.org/accepted\\_products.htm](http://vohc.org/accepted_products.htm)). Don't overcompensate by giving a dog ultra-hard chews, which can break teeth—or use the products as a substitute for professional cleanings.

## HOW TO BRUSH

- ▶ If possible, get in the habit of brushing when your pet is a puppy or a kitten. For an older animal, start slowly, preferably after establishing through a professional cleaning that there's no pain in the pet's mouth.
- ▶ Make the routine a bonding time for the two of you: Combine it with coat-brushing, games, or whatever soothes your animal.
- ▶ At first, just let your pet lick toothpaste off your finger once a day. Use a pet product, never human toothpastes, since they are designed to be rinsed. After about a week, start rubbing the paste on the gums.
- ▶ Next, introduce a toothbrush that's designed for animals (or use a soft-bristle infant toothbrush). You can try different styles to see what you and your pet are most comfortable with; some fit over the finger and may be easier to maneuver than a traditional toothbrush.
- ▶ Daily brushing is ideal. It isn't necessary to scrub the inner surfaces of the teeth because the animal's tongue does a good job there. Just carefully lift your pet's lips and brush the outer surfaces, particularly the teeth along the cheeks.



**TOOTH TIME** Martha makes brushing part of the grooming routine. Here, she brushes Francesca's teeth with a bent-handled brush, left, and Sharkey's with one that fits over her fingertip.

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