

## DENTAL CARE for YOUR PETS

We've all been educated since kindergarten how regular brushing and flossing makes a difference for our breath, for the health of our teeth, for reducing the likelihood of cavities and gum infections and dental pain, and quite simply for our overall well-being. But when it comes to our pets, we struggle to make a habit of brushing their teeth, even though daily routine dental care can provide the same health benefits for them as it does for us. And since our pets cannot brush their own teeth, we have to take the initiative to do it for them

First, a short lesson in these terms that you hear from your dental hygienist or from TV commercials: **Plaque:** the sticky, colorless film that constantly forms on your teeth. If you forget to brush your teeth before going to bed at night, you will almost certainly 'feel' the plaque as the sticky, mossy stuff on your teeth the following morning. Plaque carries bacteria that can damage the enamel of teeth and lead to the development of cavities. If plaque is not removed regularly by brushing and flossing, it hardens to create **calculus** (also known as **tartar**). As tartar builds up, it can lead to gum erosion and gum infections. Just like people, pets can develop plaque, which leads to tartar buildup. Calculus/tartar cannot be removed with a toothbrush. Only a dental professional / veterinary dental technician can remove tartar with a teeth cleaning.

**There are a number of factors that determine the amount of plaque and tartar build-up on your pet's teeth: their age and breed; genetics; the amount of saliva produced; and even their diet.** For instance, we see many more dental problems with smaller breeds of dogs, especially the toy breeds (Yorkies, Poodles, Chihuahuas, Malteses, Pomeranians, etc.). So it helps to be more pro-active in keeping their teeth brushed ... if they will cooperate.

As pet's age and mature, the years of plaque accumulation leads to tartar build-up. In many older pets, the tartar completely covers many of the teeth. And often there are also gum infections that can cause considerable pain and discomfort. Unfortunately, our pets cannot tell us if they have sore or rotten or loose teeth. But if you can smell a nasty mouth odor from your pet's mouth, almost certainly there is an infection involving one or more teeth. When this occurs, their appetite may fall off since it can be very painful to chew and eat. Some dogs and cats will drool excessively, which is another red flag of an oral infection.

When it comes to food, what can help? First, **dry dog or cat kibble will NOT necessarily keep your dog's teeth clean**, unless you are using a unique dental diet such as **Hill's t/d**. **Raw diets** with bits of ground bone mixed in can be useful. Rawhide bones can be beneficial (especially those intended for dental use). Large, uncooked (MUST be uncooked) bones from meat / cows are fine as well.

**A daily treat that I give to my own dogs are VEGGIE-DENT Tartar Control treats. They do a great job of keeping teeth cleaner, and their breath is fresher and definitely less offensive. The treats are plant-based, gluten-free, non-GMO, with no artificial ingredients or chemicals. VEGGIE-DENTS also contain a prebiotic (think of a prebiotic being 'fertilizer' for your beneficial gut bacteria) to help with digestion. And VeggieDents also come in a "Zen" formula (with L-theanine) that can help with dogs that are stressed or anxious ... as well as a "Flex" formula to support joint health, particularly beneficial for older dogs. We have a variety of VEGGIE-DENT Tartar Control Treats available at our weekend vaccine clinics, as well as our online store. On our homepage: [www.CarolinaValuePetCare.com](http://www.CarolinaValuePetCare.com), go to 'SHOP'.**

Among other chewable products for dogs, dental **rawhides** can be helpful, just be sure to use those made in North America ... not Asia. And, PLEASE **know that MILK BONES are WORTHLESS for keeping your pets' teeth clean. The fact that they add loads of empty calories makes them a source of unwanted weight gain.** So ... **NO Milk-Bone-type treats** ! Period !

**For people, the gold standard of dental care remains BRUSHING on a regular basis. And for pets, too, it is the most effective way to keep their teeth clean.** However, **it does require cooperation on their part.** If you want to have a go at brushing their teeth, first start by handling their mouth and nose, then gently lifting the lips to see the teeth. If you get resistance, then praise them and offer a suitable treat (a little peanut butter or bit of cheese) to associate a reward with handling their mouth. Their cooperation won't happen overnight ... it could take 2 or 3 weeks or longer. Be patient, and don't rush it ... and don't force it ! Then gradually introduce the motion of brushing on their teeth with your finger, adding some pet toothpaste for flavor.

For toothpastes, **only use a toothpaste made for pets** ! **Do NOT use a human toothpaste** as our pastes have fluoride in them. Since dogs cannot rinse and spit, they will swallow the paste. For a tiny dog with frequent brushing, you could possibly cause fluoride toxicity with human pastes. There are a number of different flavored toothpastes available for pets that can make brushing more agreeable and rewarding. Try poultry flavored (if your pet does not have a food allergy), or vanilla mint.

When you are ready to start using a toothbrush, **use a soft-bristled brush.** Many pet toothbrushes have small bristles on one end, and larger bristles on the other. You may find a rubber 'finger-cot' brush that you slip over your index finger to use for brushing. These are fine to start with to get your pet accustomed to brushing (sort of a 'training brush'), but are useless for long-term use since the bristles are too rubbery and flimsy. And **focus on the outside of your pet's teeth** as that's where the real problems lie. The inside (or tongue-side) of the teeth do not get nearly as dirty or gunky ... and virtually no dogs will allow you to effectively brush the inside of the teeth anyway.

Most people brush their own teeth twice daily. If you can be diligent in brushing your pet's teeth that often, we will celebrate you ! Realistically, most folks who brush their pet's teeth regularly are able to do it 5 to 7 times each week. **At the very least, brush their teeth Every Other Day to prevent plaque formation.** If you are taking your dog to the groomer to have their teeth brushed once every 4 to 8 weeks, save your money. Brushing your pet's teeth once every 4 to 8 weeks is totally useless.

Many pets need regular dental cleanings to keep their teeth healthy. You'll find that some spay-neuter clinics now offer dental cleanings (but not comprehensive dental care such as extractions, etc.) at a cost savings over many veterinary hospitals. While not always easy to accomplish, the reward of keeping your pet's teeth clean can make a huge difference in the quality of their life. Give it a try, and let us see your pet's sparkling smile !

- Dr Bob Parrish / Carolina Value Pet Care Feb2020