

BRUSHING YOUR PET'S TEETH

When we mention brushing a pet's teeth, we often get looks that vary from the amused to the incredulous. Just the idea of sticking a toothbrush in Kujo's mouth and scrubbing away seems impossible. And after all, he's only a dog!

Well, dogs and cats develop dental problems even more often than humans. Modern diets can take some of the blame, but the many different shapes and breeds of dogs and cats that have been created is another factor. One look in the mouth of a Bulldog or a Persian cat makes the simple act of chewing seem like a miracle. Dental disease is the single most widespread health problem in pets, and we know that good oral hygiene will add an average of 3 years of healthy life. Time to get out the toothbrush!

When we say "brush the teeth", we don't really mean the same bedtime routine that humans practice. Despite the mouthwashes, whiteners, and fluoride that they advertise, human toothpaste is primarily a scrubbing compound to physically remove food particles from the crevices between the teeth. And that takes a lot of work. Not so in pets. The toothpastes that are designed for dogs and cats contain enzymes that are designed to stay in contact with the teeth after application, dissolving away plaque and loose tartar before it turns hard and invades the gums. Brushing the teeth is not as important as simply applying the paste to the teeth.

We don't worry about putting the toothpaste on the inside surface of the teeth, as the motion of the tongue does a pretty good job of removing stray food particles. Most important are the outside surfaces of the upper teeth, especially towards the back of the mouth. The main salivary duct enters right next to the largest chewing teeth, and minerals in the saliva are responsible for turning plaque into hard tartar. These large teeth in the side and back of the mouth are exactly where we find the most tartar, periodontal disease, and abscess teeth.

How do I get the enzymatic toothpaste onto the teeth?

For large dogs, toothpaste can be applied with a regular toothbrush, but the typical brush is too big for most small dogs and cats. Small "finger brushes" are available that slip over the owner's fingertip and allow easy application of toothpaste to the mouth. Some people use a gauze sponge wrapped over the finger in a similar fashion. And perhaps the easiest way is to simply apply a dab of enzymatic toothpaste to your finger tip and slide it into the mouth, feeling your way along between the teeth and the cheek. Be careful, however: Those teeth are sharp!

How often should I brush?

For best results (with a cooperative canine), brush the teeth every day or two. We know that the enzymes in the pet toothpaste continue to be released for up to 48 hours. Even brushing once a week is definitely worth it, and cleaner teeth are obvious when we do our yearly examinations on pets whose owners make oral care a weekly ritual.

What should I use?

It is important NOT to use human toothpaste. It tastes and smells far too strong for pets to tolerate, and has no residual effects. Pet toothpastes should be used that contain enzymes. **CET** toothpaste is the most common veterinary brand of an enzymatic pet dentifrice. Another way of applying toothpaste is thru the use of small rawhide chews coated with the toothpaste. As the dog chews the treat, he is brushing his own teeth.