



## Home Dental Care Basics

### Caring for your pet's teeth and gums

Dental disease is a common problem in dogs and cats; eighty percent of dogs and seventy percent of cats have some degree of oral disease by age three. Dental disease leads to bad breath, swollen, bleeding gums, loose teeth, difficulty eating, and systemic problems, like heart disease and kidney and liver inflammation. You can avoid these problems by regularly visiting your veterinarian for professional exams and cleanings and by caring for your pet's teeth and gums at home.

### What causes dental disease?

A thin film of protein from saliva, food particles and dead cells forms on your pet's teeth and gums. If this layer is allowed to thicken, it becomes a perfect environment for bacteria. Bacterial plaque buildup along the gum line leads to tartar accumulation, which can lead to gingivitis (Inflamed gums) and infection. Gingivitis can lead to periodontitis, an inflammation of the deeper tissues and structures surrounding the teeth. Periodontal disease is irreversible and is especially common in small breed dogs. If left untreated, periodontal disease often leads to tooth loss. In severe cases, periodontitis may be associated with the spread of infection throughout the body, including the heart, liver and kidneys.

### Common signs of dental disease

The most common signs of oral disease include bad breath, changes in eating or chewing habits, drooling, pawing at the face and depression.

### What your veterinarian can do to prevent dental disease

At your pet's annual appointment, your veterinarian will examine its mouth and teeth for problems such as plaque, calculus, gingivitis, broken or missing teeth, discolored teeth, masses or other signs of periodontal disease. Based on these findings, your veterinarian may recommend a thorough comprehensive oral assessment and treatment while your pet is sedated. At this appointment, your veterinarian will anesthetize your pet to examine its mouth more thoroughly and to clean and x-ray the teeth. The in-depth exam may reveal that your pet needs treatment such as tooth extraction. After your pet's teeth are examined and cleaned, they are polished and treated with an anti-tartar product called Oravet.

### Brushing your pet's teeth at home

Brushing your pet's teeth can go a long way toward preventing dental disease. Some pets resist brushing, but most will eventually accept it, especially if you start a brushing routine when your pet is young (10 weeks to 10 months). Aim at brushing your pet's teeth once daily or at least twice a week.

**Step 1:** Choose pet toothpaste your pet likes. (Do NOT use human toothpaste on your pet because it may be toxic if ingested.) Several brands and flavors are available; we recommend CET brand. Place a small amount of flavored pet toothpaste on your finger, and offer it to your pet daily as a reward or treat.

This will condition your pet to view brushing as fun and rewarding. Once your pet accepts toothpaste as a reward, use your index finger to simulate the brushing motion of a toothbrush, while praising the pet and giving the daily dose of toothpaste.

If your pet resists, you may want to try dipping a finger in beef bouillon or tuna water and then gently massaging your pet's gums. Keep these initial sessions short and positive. Once your pet is more comfortable having its mouth handled, you can progress to oral massage with the toothpaste.

**Step 2:** Make your tooth brushing time a consistent part of your daily routine. Choose an activity that your pet really enjoys, such as his daily walk, eating, playtime when you get home from work, etc. Always take the time to introduce the toothpaste and brushing prior to these fun, predictable activities. After some practice, your pet will begin to associate tooth brushing and mouth handling with the favorite activity.

**Step 3:** Once your pet is tolerating the tooth finger massage, introduce a soft-bristled pet toothbrush. The brushing technique for dogs and cats is similar to that for people. Position the bristles at a 45-degree angle to the tooth. Make small circular strokes at the gum line while rotating the bristles outward to remove debris. Start at the back teeth and work forward and around to the other side. Eight to ten brush strokes are usually sufficient for a given area. (Gauze wrapped around your finger and used similarly to a brush may be easier for some pets to handle). Focus on the outside (the area of the tooth closest to the lips) of the upper teeth. Since pets tend not to chew much with their front teeth, these teeth should be a priority when brushing. As you and your pet get more comfortable, you can progress to brushing the bottom teeth.

### **Other ways to prevent dental disease**

Toys, treats, rawhide chews, and specially formulated foods are available to help keep your pet's teeth clean, but brushing is the most successful strategy. Most of these toys and foods have a mild abrasive action to help wipe away the thin layer of protein that builds up on teeth. Others are treated with enzymes to help reduce bacteria. Your veterinarian may also recommend gels, sprays, rinses, water additives or special treats or foods that chemically retard plaque. We recommend CET Aqua Dental water additive for plaque prevention, as well as CET HEXtra and Veggie Dent chews. Diets include Science Diet T/D and Royal Canin Dental.

Follow-up exams are important to monitor home care and signs of dental disease. Keep in mind that if home dental care is not provided, then **professional cleanings may be needed more frequently** and brushing alone may not completely eliminate the need for thorough dental cleanings. If your pet is having difficulty with home care, please contact your veterinarian so you can work together to find an agreeable solution. Taking care of your pet's teeth and gums is a great way to improve your pet's overall health.