Brushing your pet's teeth at home

Vet: "You should brush your dog's teeth every day"

Client:

Vets often talk about brushing your pet's teeth as if it's the easiest thing in the world to do. Most owners will admit that they have tried; but given up because it's too stressful, too time consuming, their pets hate it, or they just forgot.

So why do we keep saying it and how can we make it easier?

Plaque is the soft furry material that forms on our teeth at the end of each day. If we did not brush this off, within two days it will become calcified, start to turn brown and become calculus. When we visit the dentist for our regular dental clean, it is this calculus that is scrapped off…. And we brush twice a day. To make a difference with our pets, we need to brush at least every second day, to remove the plaque before it becomes calcified. It won't stop the calculus completely, but it will slow the process of build- up, just like it does for our teeth. This translates into the need for less frequent dental cleans under general anaesthesia and saving teeth from gingivitis and tooth loos, happy mouths, nicer breath, better health and less expense.

When should you start?

Introducing puppies and kittens to brushing at an early age can help to imprint brushing into the daily routine. It's never too late to start in older dogs either, but first have their teeth checked and cleaned in order to avoid accidently trying to brush a sore mouth or a mouth with existing dental disease.

How to Start?

Step 1: Teach your pet that it is fun to have fingers near the mouth and face. Your pet must not feel threatened or scared. Start by using something tasty on your fingers e.g. meat juice

gravy, water from a can of tuna, peanut butter or pet toothpaste. It must be a flavour your pet likes and actively licks off your finger. If they don't like the taste or the texture, they will be reluctant to allow it in their mouth.

The action should be performed with the pet in a calm, relaxed state, sitting on their bed or in your lap. For smaller animals – sitting on top of a bench or washing machine on a non-slip mat can make it easier.

Handy training steps include teaching a "chin rest".

Also, getting your pet to accept a hand held across the bridge of the nose can be helpful too.

Step 2. Gently introduce your finger inside the lip and gently dab the flavoured liquid on their gums and teeth. Do this for a couple of days so that your pet learns that fingers in the mouth is a good thing with tasty rewards. Introduce a little lip lift at the same time. Repeat for short periods(seconds) when playing. Always end the session positively with a reward.

Step 3: When they are comfortable with fingers in the mouth, we will introduce something on the finger as a cleaning tool. You can use a piece of first aid gauze, Chux super wipe, cut up rag, folded kitchen paper, or piece of pantyhose wrapped firmly around a finger. Dip this in the flavoured liquid you used in Step 1 and use the wrapped finger to gentle rub the teeth. Start with short periods in the mouth, maybe only doing the canine or big fang tooth on the upper jaw first.

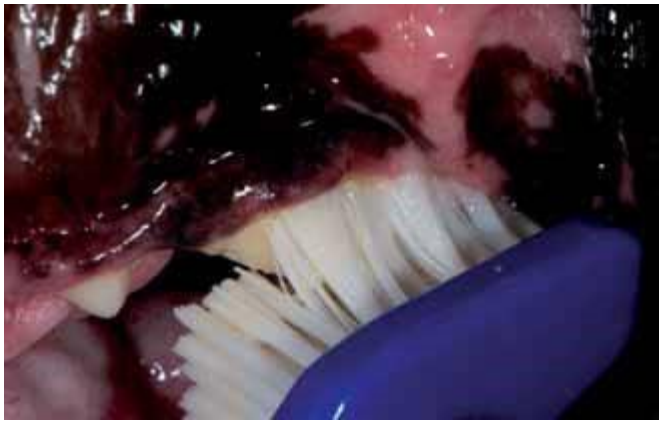
So long as your pet is comfortable and cooperative, slowly work your way across all accessible teeth. Using the across the nose hold can help to stop the pet from lifting their head away. If your pet struggles during the exercise, then you may have progressed a little too fast or continued for too long. Stop and go back to the previous step for a few days. When comfortable at that step for 2-3 days then try moving to the next step again.

Unfortunately, this method only easily allows access to the top teeth.

Please ensure that the material items are disposed of after each use. As some pets will eat them if they are left sitting around and they may cause bowel obstructions.

Step 4: Once comfortable with the small finger tool, we can then progress to the slightly bulkier finger brush. This is slip on silicon brush. Like a finger puppet, it slips over the tip of the finger and can be used to brush the teeth. Dip the brush in the flavoured liquid used in step 1. This gets your pet to a slightly bigger, bulkier object in the mouth.

A small headed baby's toothbrush with very soft bristles is alternative next step. The benefits of a toothbrush is that it can be used on the bottom row of teeth and the inside of the teeth as well. The toothbrush should be angled under the gum at the tooth crown – gum junction, as this is where the plaque causing gingivitis starts to build up.



Many good training video's are available on Youtube

What if you've tried and it's just not happening?

Some pets, despite our best efforts will not allow brushing and some owners, despite their best intentions do not have time to do this. Don't despair. There are things that can help:

1. Healthymouth is a water additive that actively reduces the bacteria in the mouth and slows down the production of plaque and keeps the plaque softer for longer. This buys you a little more time before the calculus starts to calcify. So if you are time poor, adding this to the routine can help to reduce the tooth brushing requirements to every 3-4days.
2. Oravet and Greenies – are dental chew treats that mechanically clean the teeth by encouraging chewing. Oravet also contains delmopinol that creates a protective barrier on the teeth to protect against plaque. These can be fed daily or used on the days when you don't have time to brush.
3. Hills T/D dry food. This is a specially formulated dental diet. The biscuits are manufactured in a layered network rather than extruded from a machine. The layering acts like a toothbrush as the teeth bite through them. The kibble size is bigger than standard dog and cat dry food, so it encourages chewing.
4. Vet HQ Grade 1 dental program: this is a full general anaesthetic and ultrasonic scale and polish of the teeth. As a reward for being proactive in your pet's preventative healthcare program we offer this dental with a substantial $300 wellbeing discount off the price of a normal grade 1 dental. The conditions are that every 6 months the

teeth are checked by a vet – if your home care has been working, we postpone the next clean and schedule a follow up recheck for 3-6 months time and tagging along with that is carried your wellbeing discount. If at any stage a scale and polish is required whilst in the check up period, that discount will be applied. We do this because some pets have terrible teeth and despite their owner's best efforts the teeth need more regular cleaning. The advantage in this is that the teeth maintain their health and less teeth are lost during the pet's lifetime.

Please come down to Vet HQ and have your dog and cat's teeth checked, or if you have a new puppy- enrol in puppy preschool where your pup will be trained to respond to positive training techniques.

Dr Caryn