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Brushing teeth

Crazy but true!

Why should I brush my pet's teeth?

Dental disease is one of the most common health problems affecting older cats and dogs. They get chronic infections in their mouths which really run them down and leave them susceptible to other problems. In dogs periodontal disease causes the gums to recede and loosens the teeth which eventually fall out. Cats most commonly get “resorptive lesions” – these are holes in the enamel which gradually eat away at the whole tooth which, as you can imagine, are very painful. To top it all off dental disease is the cause of the terrible, knock you off your feet, halitosis suffered by these poor pets – imagine what their mouths must taste like!

How do I brush my pet's teeth without them hating me and the loss of fingers?

Well the name of the game is patience! Training cats and dogs to have their teeth brushed is possible but only if you are extremely patient and gentle. Of course, if you are starting with a puppy or kitten, pretty soon they will think it's a normal part of life and accept it, but if your pet is already grown up it is going to be a bit more hard work, but it is still possible.

First you need 2 things: A yummy flavoured pet toothpaste (my dogs like the chicken one and my cats prefer the fish flavour) and a set of fingers that you don't mind getting sticky.

Phase 1: Toothpaste is really just a treat, honest!

Start off by offering a blob of toothpaste to be licked off your fingers as a treat every day. Once your pet is bounding up and licking it straight off with no hesitation then you can progress to phase 2...

Phase 2: Whoops, I smeared the toothpaste-treat onto your mouth, sorry!

Now instead of letting them lick the toothpaste from your fingers, gently smear it onto their front teeth. Cats at this stage will look disgusted and start cleaning themselves frantically. Don't worry, as long as they like the flavour they will hopefully put up with it. Dogs usually look at you oddly but see it as one less stage they have to go through to get their treat. Continue with this until they aren't bothered in the least and don't try to move their head away. Then progress to phase 3...

Phase 3: Do you mind if I just do the sides as well?

Now instead of just smearing the toothpaste on the front teeth, with the mouth closed slide your finger inside their cheek, smearing toothpaste on the side teeth as well. With cats I find it easiest to use my left hand to steady their head by placing my palm over their ears and using my fingers and thumb to grasp each side of their jaw. Gradually increase the number of teeth you are covering and the amount you rub the toothpaste around. Only increase how much you do when they are totally comfortable with the previous stage. You can see where the patience comes in.

Phase 4: Wow, that's weird my finger has grown bristles!

Now you can rub toothpaste onto all the teeth, its time to introduce a brush. I like using a finger brush to start with – it's a bit like a finger puppet that has soft bristles over your finger tip. Gently start using this to rub the toothpaste onto the teeth with. Then when they are happy with this...

Phase 5: You did it! Well done!

Gently start using a small soft toothbrush. Gradually you can start increasing how much actual brushing you are doing and give those teeth a proper clean.

That's all very well but is it realistic?

There is no reason why all puppies and kittens won't tolerate having their teeth brushed. As long as you take it slowly and drop back a phase if you feel they are getting stressed you will manage. Most adult pets will also learn to have their teeth brushed and for a lot of people the challenge becomes stopping the dogs stealing the toothpaste-treat from the brush before you have a chance to get it in their mouths as they are a bit too keen.

Of course there are some pets – cats in particular - who won't tolerate it. Be sensible and never turn it into a battle. If they just won't accept tooth brushing then you have to just settle for less. Get through as many of the above phases as possible but if you only ever manage to smear a bit of toothpaste about that is certainly better than nothing.

Is there anything else I can do to keep my pet's teeth clean?

There are a lot of biscuits, chews, lotions and potions that claim to clean teeth. In my experience none of them are a substitute for brushing, it's a bit like saying if you eat chewing gum you don't have to brush your teeth which is a fast track to the dentist. However some of the dry foods for teeth do help a bit in the battle against tartar. They are formulated to cleave when they are chewed rather than shattering which means the chewed biscuit slides up the tooth scraping it as it goes. We can supply good teeth preserving diets but they will only do so much, so please give the toothpaste a go.



Good Luck