

Our pets do a lot to make our lives better. Your dog might brighten up your day with her wagging tail and her unconditional affection. Or your cat might snuggle up to you, and help you relax after a rough shift at work. Since they do so much to improve our lives, it's only fair that we do what we can to take care of them too, especially in those areas where they need a bit of help. One example of this is with their dental care.

Why It's Important to Brush Your Pet's Teeth

Since dogs and cats can't brush their own teeth, it's up to us humans to step in and do this for them. Some pet owners might believe though that dogs and cats don't need to have their teeth brushed. Unfortunately, this isn't accurate. [Veterinarians and other animal health professionals](#) are clear on the need to help dogs and cats with their dental health, including through regular brushing of teeth.

Why is brushing important? For one thing, over time, it becomes possible for tartar to build up on your pet's teeth, and for gum disease to take root. This is a problem because any infection plaguing your pet's mouth can lead to other, serious health complications, that can affect your pet's heart, liver or kidneys. Again, this is serious, so it makes sense to do what you can to try to prevent these types of problems.

Another reason to brush their teeth is to improve the quality of life of your pet. You don't want your pet to have to deal with discomfort or pain in her mouth, that can also affect her ability to eat. This is a serious issue because pets (especially cats) can be very good at hiding the fact that they're in pain. Brushing your dog or cat's teeth only takes a very short amount of time each day, but the benefits can be tremendous.

The Benefits of Starting When They're Young

As with many things, the ideal time to get started is when your pet is still a puppy or a kitten. If you start them young, they're more likely to treat having their teeth brushed as just another part of the day to get used to.

It can be more difficult when starting to brush the teeth of an already adult dog or cat, but that doesn't mean it's impossible. Just like any other dog or cat-related training, you can make a lot of progress and reach your objective, by being patient, taking baby steps and using plenty of positive reinforcement.

The Items You'll Need

Toothpaste – The first thing to consider is the toothpaste that you will be using. Do not ever use human toothpaste when brushing your dog or cat's teeth. Always remember that human toothpaste contains ingredients that are harmful to your pet. Also, unlike us humans who generally gargle and spit our toothpaste out, pets won't know to do this and will generally swallow any toothpaste used on their teeth. So again, never use human toothpaste on your pet.

Instead, look for toothpaste products that are specially designed for cats or dogs. One great benefit of these products is that they use flavors that dogs and cats tend to like. So for example, cat toothpaste might have a fish flavor, while dog toothpaste might taste like beef.

It's crucial to find a toothpaste flavor that your pet enjoys because if they like how it tastes, they'll be more likely to let you brush it onto their teeth. In this way, the right toothpaste can make your job easier, so be sure to try different flavors until you find the right one to use.

Also, toothpaste that's specially formulated for cats or dogs will have ingredients that are safe for them to swallow, and that do a good job of dealing with tartar.

Toothbrush – The main piece of equipment you'll be using is the toothbrush. You'll find that there are many variations and types to choose from. Some toothbrushes look like the ones used by little children. Others can be worn on your finger, so that you can more easily move it around your pet's mouth.

It's important to choose a toothbrush that's the right size for your pet's mouth. So for example, a larger breed of dog will tend to benefit from a larger toothbrush with a longer handle. Also, make sure that the bristles are soft so that the actual brushing won't cause discomfort or pain for your pet.

How to Brush Your Pet's Teeth

When you brush your pet's teeth, especially if you're still starting out, be sure to stay relaxed, be patient and set realistic expectations. Take small steps.

- Start by just letting your pet get used to you touching and manipulating their cheeks, lips and mouth area. When you stroke their head, move your hands around and occasionally move their lips so that you expose their teeth. Do this a little at a time and then go back to stroking and playing.
- From there, you can move on to introducing them to the dog or cat toothpaste. Don't use the brush first. Just put some toothpaste on your finger (or on a treat) and let them lick and taste it. Later, you can apply the toothpaste directly onto a tooth for them to lick. Experiment with different flavors until you find one that they seem to enjoy tasting.
- With each step in the process, be sure to reward your pet appropriately. Whether it's through words, petting or some other gesture your pet likes, be sure to let them know that you appreciate their cooperation.
- When your pet seems to have gotten used to having toothpaste in their mouth, you can start to introduce the toothbrush that you plan to use. At first, don't worry about the actual brushing motion. Instead, just use the toothbrush to apply the toothpaste to your pet's tooth, for them to taste and enjoy. You can also just have them lick the toothpaste directly off the toothbrush, while it's in their mouth area.
- Eventually, you can start brushing one or several teeth. You'll be using one hand to expose your pet's teeth (by raising their lip), while the other hand does the brushing. Keep in mind that you'll only be brushing the surface of the teeth that faces toward your pet's cheeks. Brushing the inner part of the mouth isn't generally an option for at-home brushing.
- Again, keep your expectations small at first. If your pet only tolerates ten seconds of brushing, that's alright. Start there, and slowly try to increase the duration of the brushing, moving to two minutes eventually if possible. If you don't get much time during each brushing session, just work your way, one tooth (or several) at a time each day, until you eventually cover a good portion of the mouth.
- This is one reason it's important to brush your dog or cat's teeth everyday. It allows you to clean your pet's entire mouth (or most of it), not in one sitting, but eventually over days and weeks. Daily brushing, even if it doesn't last so long, will still have a beneficial effect.
- There's no need to rinse out your pet's mouth, since the toothpaste you use is safe for them to swallow. Just make sure they have enough water to drink in their bowl.
- Finally, just like us humans, be sure to schedule regular visits to the vet (at least once a year), so that your dog or cat can be given a deep mouth cleaning. This requires anesthetic, so it's something you'll need to leave to a medical professional. This part is important because it allows your pet to have a fresh start, as you continue your daily brushing.

It's up to us to take care of our pets' dental health, since this is something they can't do for themselves. It might be trying and difficult at first, especially if your dog or cat doesn't react all that well to having their teeth brushed. But this is one of those things where you know that it's good for them, and so it just has to be done. Thankfully, with patience, some understanding and a willingness to go slow, you may find that this tooth brushing process ends up not being so bad.