



Dental Health and Oral Care

Clermont Animal Hospital Inc.

Your Pet's New Teeth

Puppies and kittens lose their baby teeth and get their new permanent adult teeth during the time they are 3 - 6 months old. Once your pet's adult teeth start coming in, dental care becomes an important part of providing home health care for your dog.

- The incisors are the first teeth to be lost at 3 - 4 months. These are the small teeth in the very front and center of your puppy's mouth. Most of the time you will not see these teeth fall out as they are often swallowed or lost in grass or carpeting. By 4.5 months, your pet should have all of his or her adult incisors.
- The baby canine teeth (sharp pointed teeth) fall out between 4.5 and 5 months. The adult canine will be completely grown in by 5 ½ - 6 months. During this time, your pet is getting several new teeth (premolars and molars) in the back of the mouth that are more difficult to see.

What if the baby teeth don't fall out?

By the time the adult tooth is fully in, the corresponding baby tooth should have fallen out. In some cases, the baby teeth (particularly the canine teeth) do not fall out when they should. If this is the case, it is important for Clermont Animal Hospital to take out these baby teeth. This procedure requires anesthesia, and is usually done at the same time as a spay or neuter. If these baby teeth are not removed, they will be a site of high tartar buildup and may result in future dental problems including bad breath, gingivitis (gum disease) and tooth loss.

Why is Dental Care Important?

Just as you need to brush your teeth everyday to prevent plaque and tartar buildup, your pet's teeth need routine daily cleanings as well. While treats and chew toys can help reduce plaque formation (just as chewing gum can for humans), they can't replace the need for daily brushing.

What are plaque and tartar?

Plaque is a soft, sticky substance made up of food particles, saliva (spit) and bacteria that can be removed easily by brushing. However, once plaque remains on the teeth for more than 24 hours, it starts to harden into a chalky, mineralized substance called **tartar** (this is the same process that occurs in humans).

What happens if I do not brush my pet's teeth?

As tartar builds up, it leads to a problem called **periodontal disease**. While tartar creates cavities in humans' teeth, in dog or cats' mouths tartar does not affect the tooth itself. Instead it causes inflammation or soreness of the gums (gingivitis) and a breakdown of the structures holding the tooth in place (periodontal disease). This leads to:

- Tooth loss
- Pain
- Decreased appetite
- Irritability

Because tartar and plaque contain huge amounts of bacteria, they can lead to more serious infections including:

- Endocarditis (infection of the heart valves)
- Hepatitis (infection of the liver)
- Nephritis (infection of the kidney)

If that is not enough to get you to brush your pet's teeth, consider this: 95 percent of "bad breath" cases in dogs and cats are caused by periodontal disease. If you cuddle or sleep with your pet, bad breath is the last thing you want your pet to develop!

Do I really need to brush my pet's teeth every day, or do I just need to do it once in while?

Daily teeth brushing is one of the best things you can do for your dog or cat's general health and well being. Plaque and tartar accumulate on a daily basis, so occasional brushings are not enough.

While brushing your pet's teeth once or twice a week may be better than nothing, it will not stop plaque and tartar buildup. Not only will daily brushing reduce the incidence of all of the problems described above, it will also decrease the frequency of professional dental cleanings. These require full anesthesia, which always carries a small risk to your pet and can become costly if frequent cleanings are necessary.

Brushing Your Pet's Teeth

It is important for you and your pet to develop a dental care routine that both of you can at least tolerate well, if not enjoy. This is a routine you want to establish for the rest of your pet's life, so don't rush the process. If your pet is not comfortable with oral care, he or she will fight you or try to get away, making it impossible to clean his or her teeth.

To train your pet to accept oral care, it is best to follow steps in a program of gradual progression. Do not move on to the next step until both you and your dog are comfortable with the step before it.

Be sure to give plenty of reassuring words, praise and treats to make it a relaxed and enjoyable process for both of you. Remember to keep safety first. If at any time your dog or cat shows aggression, growls or tries to bite, stop immediately and contact our hospital or your professional trainer for advice.

1. Start by gently playing with your pet's mouth.
 - Gently lift the lips and look at the teeth.
 - Rub your index finger along the outer surfaces of all teeth and gums.
 - Gently open your pet's mouth and examine the inner surfaces of all of the teeth.
 - Look for any abnormalities including tartar buildup, gum redness/inflammation, and sores or masses.
 - If your pet allows this without a fuss give plenty of praise. If he or she tries to toss his or her head and squirm, continue to gently play with the mouth while talking soothingly.
 - Once your pet relaxes, give praise and stop.
 - Start out by doing this for only 20-30 seconds at a time, and gradually increase the time until your pet will allow you to do this for two minutes with no resistance.
2. If your dog or cat is laid back, you may be able to clean the inner surfaces of the teeth as well. Once he or she is used to you playing with his or her mouth, try holding the mouth open and rubbing your fingers along the inner surfaces of the teeth and gums. Do not attempt this if your dog is struggling with you at all. The inner surfaces do not accumulate tartar nearly as quickly as the outer surfaces, and it is not worth getting bit trying to clean them or making your pet dislike dental care in the process.
3. As soon as your dog or cat accepts you playing with his or her mouth without a fuss, start using a cotton ball or soft gauze moistened with warm water to gently wipe the outsides of all teeth. As your pet begins to accept this, gradually increase the amount of time until you reach two minutes.
4. Once your dog or cat is comfortable with the cotton ball or gauze, it is time to introduce the toothpaste.

- Be sure to only use toothpaste designed specifically for animals (available through Clermont Animal Hospital). Human toothpaste creates too much foam, does not have a taste that appeals to pets and can cause vomiting. We can provide you with a sample of toothpaste to use at this stage in the process.
 - Put a small amount of toothpaste (pea-sized portion) on the cotton ball or gauze and rub the surfaces of your dog's teeth and gums as before.
5. The final phase in training is to introduce the actual brush.
- It is usually best to start with a finger brush, a plastic soft-bristled brush that slips over your finger. These brushes are available through our hospital.
 - Use this brush in a back-and-forth motion along the outer surfaces of the teeth and gums. (Do not attempt to clean the inner surfaces unless you are confident that your pet will tolerate this without a struggle).
 - Be sure to use the brush to gently massage the gums in addition to brushing the teeth themselves.
 - Start out brushing for only 20 - 30 seconds at a time and gradually increasing to two to three minutes.
 - Once your pet is used to the finger brush, you may either continue with this brush or switch to a soft-bristled brush with a handle and repeat step five using this brush (be sure to choose a brush specifically designed for pets).

Other tips:

- Be sure to go through the above steps slowly with your dog or cat. By allowing your pet to gradually adjust to oral care, you will make it a positive experience.
- Incorporate plenty of praise and a small treat when your pet allows you to care for his or her teeth.
- While we routinely brush our teeth after eating, it may be helpful to spend several minutes BEFORE feeding your pet to perform your dental care routine. This is because it will help you make dental care a part of your daily routine by creating a consistent time for doing it. Providing the meal immediately following your dental routine will also create positive reinforcement for good behavior. Your pet will learn that if he or she relaxes and allows you to brush his or her teeth, he or she will get to eat sooner.

Professional Dental Cleanings

Despite your best efforts to keep your dog or cat's teeth clean, almost all dogs and cats will need a professional cleaning at some point. While some pets need professional cleanings as often as twice a year (like humans), most only require cleanings every one to three years.

As part of all routine health checks, our doctors will evaluate the teeth and gums and make recommendations for professional cleanings when necessary. Since we only check healthy pets once or twice a year, it is important for you to monitor the teeth and gums at home between visits. If you notice any of the signs below, you should set up an appointment for a dental evaluation. We can then schedule a professional cleaning.

How do I know if my dog needs a professional cleaning?

1. **Tartar buildup on teeth.** Tartar is a tan or grey chalky material that cakes teeth, particularly along the gum line. If the teeth are just slightly discolored from the tartar, a professional cleaning is probably not necessary. Once buildup begins it is important to have the teeth cleaned.

2. **Gingivitis.** Gingivitis is inflammation of the gums.
 - It typically appears as a reddened area of gum right next to the tooth.
 - It usually occurs in association with tartar buildup, but it can occur by itself.
 - Once gingivitis is seen, it is important to take action. Gingivitis is a sign that there is damage to the attachment between the tooth and gum. If gingivitis continues unchecked, this damage can become permanent and irreversible, leading to periodontal disease (loss of bone) causing root exposure and tooth loss. If you notice red or inflamed gums, do not put off a professional evaluation.
3. **Chipped, broken, or fractured teeth.** Dogs and cats of any age can break a tooth by chewing rocks, hard toys or metal. Traumatic injuries can occur if your pet is hit in the mouth.
 - While broken teeth may not appear to be causing a problem, they should always be evaluated and probed by one of our doctors.
 - If the root is exposed, it can allow an infection to develop weeks or even months after the initial injury, creating a large and painful abscess. Root canal exposure can also be quite painful even if an abscess does not develop.
4. **Bad breath.** As mentioned before, almost all cases of bad breath are due to periodontal (dental) disease. If your dog has bad breath, it is probably time for a professional cleaning.
5. **Loose teeth/ teeth with root exposure.** If you notice teeth that are loose or teeth with gum recession and root exposure, you have waited too long to prevent irreversible damage. This doesn't mean we can't help your pet, however. Don't delay! Set up an appointment for evaluation. Even if your dog is not showing signs of pain or discomfort, he or she is probably experiencing it. We will probably need to extract (remove) all loose teeth. Teeth with root exposure may or may not require extraction.

What happens during a professional dental cleaning?

- All professional dental cleanings require anesthesia. For this reason, we recommend pre-dental blood screenings to make sure that your pet doesn't have any liver, kidney or electrolyte issues and is not showing any signs of systemic infection related to the tartar buildup.
- With every dental cleaning, we use an ultrasonic cleaner to remove all plaque and tartar. (This is the same mechanized tool that is used in humans when more extensive dental cleanings are required.)
- If there are any areas where the gum has started to detach from the tooth, we check the depth of detachment and determine if the tooth needs to be extracted or if we can perform a root plane procedure to potentially save the tooth.
- All teeth are polished to decrease future plaque accumulation using a fluoride polish.