

February 27, 2012

Dr. Nancy Irvine
Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.

Brushing a pet's teeth a worthwhile process that takes some time

Perhaps you know that your dogs and cats should have their teeth brushed. But, seriously, how do you brush their teeth? I would like to help answer that question.

Introducing tooth brushing may take days, weeks or months, depending on your pet. This is an exercise in relaxation and acceptance of being handled.

Pets swallow the paste, so only fluoride-free pet toothpaste is used to avoid fluoride toxicosis. About 1/4 teaspoon of paste is offered to the pet as a reward for relaxing, sitting or lying down to establish both that the paste and the relaxed behavior are good things.

Once the pet recognizes the paste as a reward, make offering the paste a daily routine. Brushing before bed time or at a time when your pet will not be eating for a while is best.

The brushing tool must be soft regardless of whether you use a toothbrush or a finger brush that slips over your finger. Once, I thought that an Oral B 40 toothbrush was great. Significant improvement in acceptance by both our dogs was seen when I switched to a super soft brush.

Comfort and acceptance go hand in hand when remembering that your goal is to improve your pet's health by being able to easily brush their teeth every day for years.

With routine being established and a pet that loves the paste, the brush is simply introduced as the carrier of the yummy paste that is awarded when your pet sits down or lies down. If your pet gets up while licking, then the brush is moved so that it is unavailable until your pet resumes the down and relaxed position.

No cues or force is used. Your pet's cue to sit or lie down is that you have the paste. I believe most people who try to brush their pets' teeth and give up have rushed this essential training process.

The next step is to use your free hand to stroke your pet while it is licking the brush. Work toward being able to stroke its head coursing over the eyes and along the muzzle on both sides.

With time, rub along its lips and push up the upper lip briefly. You are establishing tactile tolerance and trust.

Most dog and cat anatomy allows the maxillary canine teeth and adjacent premolars to be most easily reached. You may need to lift the lip a little to put the brush in contact with the teeth. Do not hold the lip up during brushing.

With a super soft brush, your aim need not be perfect. Only brush the cheek side of the teeth. Do not worry about brushing the chewing surface or tongue side.

Young dogs and cats may want to chew on the brush. This is fine to the extent that you control the brush and prevent the pet from breaking it or taking it from you. Our dogs chewed at the brush and bristles early on in their training. I think this helped them become comfortable with the sensation of the bristles as I turned the bristles upward, sideways and down so that a solid toothy grip could not be made.

Timing matters. Choose a time when your pet is relaxed and not distracted. Always remember your long-term goal for brushing. Shake off any frustration and simply try it again tomorrow.

Moving back in training is very common; re-establish what has been mastered then move forward slowly.

Daily brushing with enzymatic paste removes plaque, which is the nearly invisible bacteria and food particle layer that causes gingivitis. Brushing will not and is not intended to remove visible mineralized calculus. Brushing will not cure red, swollen or bleeding gingival disease. In fact, brushing is likely to be painful in a mouth with such disease. Consultation with your veterinarian is very important to re-establish health.

The idea of using a hard brush to remove any colored or visible material from the teeth is completely wrong. If you have a pet that allows such roughness, you should count your blessings as a pet that tolerates roughness is a special and forgiving animal.

Trying to chip off visible calculus is not advised as this may lead to bleeding, dislocation of a tooth you may not have known was loose or pain that will impede your efforts to build the trust that permits you to perform helpful daily brushing.

A veterinary dental specialist offers this advice: Your pet's teeth should be brushed with the same force that would allow you to brush the surface of a tomato without tearing the skin.

I am sure your veterinarian can help you with specific questions about your pet's oral health.