

Ask the Vet:

Be patient and gentle when brushing pet's teeth

By Nancy Irvine, DVM – Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.

Perhaps you know that your dogs and cats should have their teeth brushed. But, seriously, how do you brush their teeth?

I have been brushing my pets' teeth for nearly 20 years very successfully. I would like to help you achieve the same success for the benefit of your pets.

Introducing tooth brushing may take days, weeks or months. Success first depends on your patience. No force is ever involved.

My pets love to have their teeth brushed because the process involves yummy paste and quiet, gentle, predictable contact with no surprises.

Pets swallow the paste so only fluoride-free pet toothpaste is used to avoid fluoride toxicosis. Initially, a 1-inch strip or ½ teaspoon of paste is offered to the pet as a reward for relaxing, sitting or lying down to establish that both 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 at a repeatable time. 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 really 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 my pets was seen immediately when I switched to an even softer brush.

Many toothbrushes sold for pets are terribly harsh. We recommend a special smaller brush for cats and tiny dogs.

Comfort and acceptance go hand-in-hand when remembering that your goal is to improve your pets' health by being able to easily brush their teeth every day for years. You must not be concerned with the effectiveness of the brushing at first. You should only be setting a pattern for this daily activity.

With routine established and a pet that loves the paste, the brush simply is introduced as the carrier of the yummy paste that is awarded when your pet sits down or lies down next to you. 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 cue or force is used. Your pet's cue to sit or lie down is that you have the paste.

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

With time, rub along the lips and push the upper lip up briefly. You are establishing tactile tolerance and trust. Do not allow a second person to interact with your pet as this is very distracting. Tooth brushing is conducted with only you and your pet. I know this from experience.

Dog and cat anatomy allow 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. I 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 backward or starting over in training is often needed if you feel like you are not progressing. Review what has been mastered, then move forward slowly.

Daily brushing with enzymatic paste helps to remove plaque, which is the nearly invisible bacteria and food particle layer that causes gingivitis. Plaque accumulates in mere hours, so effective brushing requires at least daily frequency.

Brushing will not and is not intended to remove visible mineralized tartar. 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 a healthy mouth before starting to brush the teeth.

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 in pain that will cause fear and prevent you from building the trust that permits you to perform helpful daily brushing.

One of my favorite dental specialist mentors 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 that your veterinarian can help you with specific questions about your pet's oral health. Disease of the mouth is very common among pets. Preventing and controlling that disease will benefit your pet's overall health and happiness greatly. Patience, gentleness and persistence are keys to success.