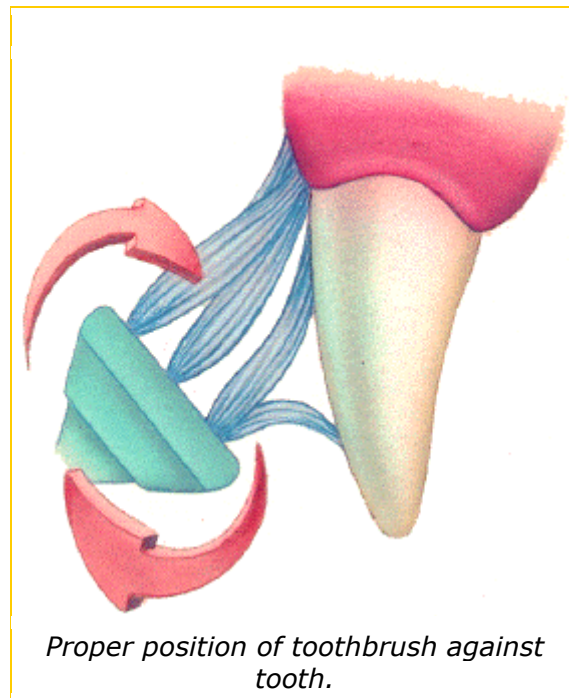


# A Guide to Tooth Brushing for Pets

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What would happen if you stopped brushing your teeth? Even if you only ate hard food as most dogs and many cats do, there still would be problems. You should be brushing your pet's teeth if you can manage it. It's not as difficult as you might imagine, and is extremely beneficial to your pet's health and comfort.

What are the benefits? Brushing removes the daily accumulation of bacterial-harboring plaque from the teeth. Even though dogs & cats do not commonly get true cavities, they do suffer from periodontal disease. If untreated, gum disease can lead to pain and tooth loss.

## ***How do you brush your pet's teeth?***

***Step one is to pick an appropriate pet toothbrush.*** The ideal dog toothbrush will have a long handle, an angled head to better fit the mouth, and extra soft bristles. Cat toothbrushes are shorter, with smaller brush heads. For dogs less than 30 pounds and many cats, the finger toothbrush that fits over the tip of your finger works well.



**Step two is to select an appropriate toothpaste.** The best pet toothpastes contain enzymes that help control plaque. Try to avoid toothpastes with baking soda, fluoride, detergents, or salt (products that are sometimes found in human pastes). Rather than placing the paste on top of the brush, incorporate it between the bristles. This allows the paste to spend the most time next to the teeth and gums.

**Step three is to get the brush with paste into your pet's mouth to get all the teeth brushed.**



Most dogs and many cats accept brushing if they are approached in a gentle manner. If you can start when they are young, it's quite easy, but even older pets will often accept the process. Start slowly; you can use a washcloth or piece of gauze to wipe the teeth, front and back in the same manner you will eventually be using the toothbrush. Do this twice daily for about two weeks and your pet should be familiar with the approach. Then take the pet toothbrush, soak it in warm water and start brushing daily for several days. When your pet accepts this brushing, add the pet toothpaste.

An alternative approach takes advantage of the fact that toothpaste made for animals has a flavor that

they usually like:

To start, place a small amount of veterinary toothpaste on your finger and let your pet sniff and lick it. Once your pet is used to the taste, then you can place a small amount of toothpaste on the toothbrush and just let your pet lick the toothpaste off. The toothpaste is safe to swallow, and this gets your pet used to having the brush in his/her mouth with the toothpaste. After your pet is comfortable with this, you can then start to brush his or her teeth as noted below.

Most attention should be given to the outside of the upper teeth. The toothbrush bristles should be placed at the gum margin where the teeth and gums meet at a 45-degree angle. The movement should be in an oval pattern. Be sure to gently place the bristle ends into the area around the base of the tooth as well as into the space between the teeth. Ten short back and forth motions should be completed, then the brush moved to a new location. Cover three to four teeth at a time.

#### **Frequency of brushing:**

The ideal frequency of brushing is once daily, since plaque forms within 24 hours of brushing. One study has shown that the frequency of brushing is more important than the type of toothpaste used. Brushing once daily to once every other day is significantly more effective than brushing once weekly or less often. However, this may not be possible for many pet owners. Rather than abandoning tooth brushing altogether, remember...some is better than none.

Taking an active role in the care of your pet's dental care will help reduce dental disease, bad breath and potential life threatening heart and kidney disease. Everyone wins.

#### **Helpful Hints**

- For cats, try dipping the brush in tuna fish juice before introducing the toothpaste.
- If possible start brushing when your pet is young, because toothbrushing is accepted best at a young age.
- If your pet resists, don't force it. It is best to approach your pet when he or she is calm. Try again the next day, if you must.
- Stop immediately if your pet shows any signs of aggression.
- Always praise your pet during and after the brushing and give a treat such as a favorite toy, playtime, or a walk after brushing.
- Do the brushing about the same time every day, so that it becomes a routine that is expected by your pet.

## **Instructional videos:**

The American Kennel Club has posted a video online demonstrating tooth brushing techniques. You can watch the video here:

[How to Brush your dog's teeth - AKC Vet's Corner \(youtube.com\)](#)

Here is another video by Dr. Clarence Sitzman, a board certified veterinary dentist, who offers advice on tooth brushing techniques:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAorj\\_C-20Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAorj_C-20Q)

### *Credits:*

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Additional information and handouts can be found online at the web sites of:

The American Veterinary Dental College - [Animal Owner Resources – AVDC.org](http://www.avdc.org)

Veterinary Partner web site - <http://www.veterinarypartner.com>

Veterinary Oral Health Council – <http://www.vohc.org>