

# DENTAL CARE FOR DOGS & CATS



## Why is dental care important?

Periodontal disease is caused by plaque accumulation on the teeth. Plaque is a bacterial film (or scum layer) that causes inflammation and infection. While gum disease (gingivitis) is an early sign, deeper problems develop over time, such as loss of jawbone, teeth, and spread of bacteria through the bloodstream to organs such as the liver, heart and kidneys. Therefore, periodontal disease not only causes oral pain, but also systemic illness.

Dental home care for your dog or cat can make a tremendous difference to their comfort and health, as well as your veterinary dental bills. The aim of dental home care is to minimise the build-up of plaque on the teeth, and prevent mineralisation (hardening) of plaque to form calculus (otherwise known as 'tartar').

## Making sense of what is out there – where do we start?

If a method or product does NOT affect plaque accumulation or the formation of tartar, it is NOT going to help prevent periodontal disease. There is no strict regulation on the labelling of products as far as 'dental benefits' so we need to look at each method objectively and assess whether they are truly helping the fight against plaque. We also need to look at the risks, as well as the benefits, when deciding how we want to care for our pets' teeth.

To stop or slow the buildup of plaque on the teeth, all methods or products fall into TWO main categories:

**Mechanical methods** -- Plaque can be removed from the teeth by physical methods such as tooth brushing and chewing. Having a professional scale and polish under anaesthesia is the ultimate mechanical method of removing plaque.

**Chemical methods** -- Chemicals such as antiseptics can also be used to kill plaque bacteria or slow down tartar formation, and are a useful addition to mechanical methods.

## Some tips for designing your own dental care program

1. No one method or product can completely control plaque. Combining several methods will generally achieve the best results.
2. Try to have at least one mechanical method, such as toothbrushing or chewing (or ideally both!) – chemical methods work best if used to support mechanical cleaning (this is why our dentists tell us to brush and floss, rather than just relying on mouthwash!).
3. Home care products do not replace the need for regular dental checks and professional dental care under anaesthesia. Even humans who brush their teeth twice a day, floss and use mouthwash need to have their teeth examined and professionally cleaned by human dentists on a regular basis. Home care spaces out the need for professional care, and means that teeth are less likely to be lost or irreversibly damaged.

## TOOTHBRUSHING

If your pet will allow it, tooth brushing is the single most effective way of controlling plaque – that's why human dentists want us to do it! Brushing disturbs the layer of plaque forming on the teeth before it can harden into tartar. Ideally this should be done daily. Many pets will accept brushing if it is introduced slowly and associated with a reward – even old dogs can learn new tricks! Check out our information sheet on the 'slow and sneaky method' for brushing your pet's teeth for handy hints on getting started.

Dog and cat toothbrushes and toothpastes are readily available. Toothbrushes need to have soft bristles as we don't want to cause damage or discomfort. With toothpaste, it is important to use one designed for animals, as human toothpaste is not designed to be swallowed (and dogs and cats are not good at rinsing and spitting!). Besides, in flavours such as chicken, beef and tuna, toothpaste can help make brushing a treat! Alternatively, oral antiseptics can be used (see below), or just water alone -- most of the benefit is actually from the brushing action.

It is very important to have your pet's mouth examined by a vet before commencing a brushing program, as the presence of any existing disease may make the experience painful – you can then start safely once any disease is under control. Once plaque hardens to tartar, it cannot be removed by brushing alone, so if your dog or cat has visible tartar, having this professionally removed first will make any homecare you perform much more effective.

## CHEWING

Dogs love to chew, and this has the added benefit of helping to keep their teeth clean. Chewing has an abrasive action that helps remove plaque – however it is important to offer something that is safe (not too small, hard or brittle) yet still effective. Cats tend to be a bit more finicky than dogs, but can be convinced to chew if offered something interesting and tasty (my cats LOVE chewing strips of meat)!

**Bones** -- bones are very popular in Australia and have the added benefit of providing enjoyment and boredom relief. However they should be used with caution as there are some potential complications:

- Some pets will break their teeth on them, particularly the upper carnassials (large cheek teeth). This can lead to infection of the jawbone and tooth root abscess if left untreated.
- Bones can cause gastrointestinal obstruction and trauma. Cooked bones should never be fed as they are brittle and prone to splintering. Match the size of the bone to the pet (ask your vet for advice if you are unsure) to try and minimise the risk of choking or obstruction.

Some pets may chew bones for years and never have a problem, whereas others chew in such a manner that makes them highly prone to dental damage. You should supervise your pet and remove any bones if concerned about their chewing behaviour.

‘Softer’ chewing options that are widely available include special dental diets and a range of chew treats and toys.

**Dental Diets** -- Although dry foods may help disturb plaque, many are not particularly effective in slowing down periodontal disease as they shatter when bitten, and therefore do not require much actual chewing. However, some pet food companies have now released both canine and feline ‘dental diets’ that have been scientifically proven to help reduce plaque and/or tartar buildup. These may work by physically cleaning the teeth (they do not fall apart easily when chewed) or by the addition of chemicals that prevent the hardening of plaque to form tartar.

Some foods and treats have been approved by the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC)-- this means they have been independently evaluated to be effective in reducing plaque and/or tartar accumulation. However, not all companies have sought to use this logo, so just because a product does not display it, this does not mean it is ineffective in slowing down periodontal disease.

Choice of diet may be affected by other health issues, so it is a good idea to get professional advice on which diets are most suitable for your pet -- the best place to start is your local vet hospital.

**Chew treats and toys** -- Other chewy options include specially designed dental chew treats (which may also be impregnated with chemicals that retard plaque growth), rawhides, pigs’ ears, and chew toys (such as rubber Kong toys). As with bones, careful consideration of size, hardness and brittleness is very important in minimising the risks. Hard toys (including some toy bones) should be avoided as they increase the risk of dental fracture. Tennis balls are very abrasive and can cause excessive tooth wear. As with bones, supervision of your pet while chewing is recommended.

## CHEMICAL PLAQUE CONTROL

Antiseptics kill plaque bacteria, and are most effective when combined with a method that physically disrupts the plaque layer to allow them to penetrate properly (this is why dentists don't recommend we use mouthwash alone as a substitute for brushing our teeth!). They are available in several forms, including rinses, gels, pastes and water additives. Cats in particular may find some of these 'offensive' to their sensitive palates, so ask your local veterinary hospital for advice on which product is best suited to your pet.

Chlorhexidine is the 'gold standard' antiseptic for plaque control, and can be purchased in several different formulations. It can be used as a rinse, or combined with toothbrushing. Other products are also available, it is best to check with your vet for details of which ones will best suit your pet.