

# Brushing Your Cat's Teeth

- Periodontal disease can lead to tooth loss and affects most cats before they are 3 years old. Bacteria from periodontal disease can spread to affect other organs and cause illness.
- Before you start brushing your cat's teeth, have them checked by your veterinarian.
- Make toothbrushing enjoyable for your cat by rewarding him or her immediately after each session.
- Be very patient when teaching your cat to accept toothbrushing.
- If your cat won't tolerate toothbrushing, your veterinarian can recommend plaque-preventive products for your cat.

## Periodontal Disease—Why Brush?

Periodontal (gum) disease can lead to tooth loss and affects most cats before they are 3 years old. Bacteria from periodontal disease can spread to affect other organs and cause illness. One of the best ways to help prevent periodontal disease is to brush your cat's teeth on a regular basis—daily, if he or she will allow it.

Cats are never too young to start having their teeth brushed at home; in fact, the younger they are, the better.

Before you start brushing your cat's teeth, have them checked by your veterinarian. Your veterinarian may recommend a dental cleaning to remove any existing plaque and tartar, which contribute to periodontal disease. If your cat has severe dental disease, extraction of the affected teeth may be recommended. Follow your veterinarian's recommendation on how long to wait after dental cleaning or extraction before brushing your cat's teeth.

## What You Need

- Baby toothbrush or pet toothbrush that is an appropriate size for your cat; if your cat won't tolerate a toothbrush, a small piece of washcloth can be used
- Pet toothpaste
- Treat or other reward your cat really likes

**Note:** Do not use toothpaste for people or baking soda because these can upset your cat's stomach. Cat toothpaste comes in different flavors (e.g., poultry, beef). You may need to try a couple flavors to find the one your cat likes the best. The more your cat likes the toothpaste, the easier it will be to train him or her to accept brushing.

## Technique

- Toothbrushing should be a bonding experience that is constantly reinforced with praise and rewards. Be very patient—teaching your cat to accept toothbrushing may take weeks. Make toothbrushing enjoyable for your cat by rewarding him or her immediately after each session.
- You only need to brush the outside of your cat's teeth—the side facing the cheek. Only do as much at a time as your cat allows. You may not be able to do the whole mouth at first.
- **If you are ever worried about being bitten, stop. Ask your veterinarian about how best to care for your cat's teeth.**
- Start by letting your cat get used to the toothbrush and toothpaste. Put them out and let your cat sniff them. You can let your cat taste the toothpaste to see if he or she likes it.
- Also, get your cat used to you touching his or her mouth. Lift his or her lips, and slowly and gently rub your cat's teeth and gums with your finger. You might want to dip your finger in something

## Signs of Dental Problems

- Bad breath
- Sensitivity around the mouth
- Loss of appetite and/or weight
- Yellow or brown deposits on the teeth
- Bleeding, inflamed, and withdrawn gums
- Loose or missing teeth
- Pawing at the mouth or face
- Difficulty chewing

## Home Care

- your cat finds tasty, like juice from a can of tuna.
- When your cat is comfortable with you touching his or her mouth and is familiar with the toothbrush and toothpaste, gradually switch to putting the toothpaste on your finger, and then to putting the toothpaste on the toothbrush. Let your cat lick the paste off the brush at first to get used to having the brush in his or her mouth. If your cat won't tolerate a toothbrush, a small piece of washcloth can be used. Place a small amount of toothpaste on the washcloth, and rub it over the outside surfaces of your cat's teeth.
  - Brush your cat's teeth along the gum line. Work quickly—you don't need to scrub. Work up to 30 seconds of brushing for each side of the mouth at least every other day.
  - If you notice any problems as you brush, like red or bleeding gums or bad breath, call your veterinarian. The earlier problems are found, the easier they are to treat.

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### Other Ways to Control Plaque

Although there's no substitute for regular toothbrushing, some cats just won't allow it. If you can't brush your cat's teeth, ask your veterinarian about plaque-preventive products. Feeding dry food may also help keep your cat's teeth and gums in good condition. The Seal of Acceptance from the Veterinary Oral Health Council appears on products that meet defined standards for plaque and tartar control in dogs and cats.