

Home Dental Care for Cats

**Why should I brush my cat's teeth?**

Daily removal of plaque is the key to an effective oral hygiene program. Unless your cat’s teeth are brushed daily, plaque will build up at the gum line. Eventually calculus forms, which further irritates the gums, and infection progresses to loosen and destroy the attachment of the tooth. In addition to loose teeth, infection under the gum line can spread to the liver, kidneys and heart.

**What should I look for when I examine my cat’s teeth?**

Monthly examinations of your cat's mouth are quite easy. If you are unsure, ask your veterinarian if your cat is friendly enough for a safe oral exam before getting started.

It is best to place the cat on a well-lit, sturdy table in a quiet environment and keep the exam as brief as possible. The entire procedure should only take a minute or two. Most cats are easy to work with when approached gently and without apprehension. However, if your cat growls at any time during the exam or seems irritated, it would be wise to stop.

Before opening the cat's mouth, examine the face for swelling, especially under the eyes. Broken teeth can cause abscesses that can spread below either eye. Next, feel around the neck below the ears. Abnormal swelling of this area can occur from infection, cancer or inflammation. Finally, gently pull the lips back to expose the side of your cat’s teeth and gums. If there is a foul odor, treatment is often needed.

Since cats cannot brush their own teeth, dental problems such as gingivitis and periodontitis are common. Redness where the gums meet the teeth may represent inflammation, infection or trauma. In cases of advanced periodontitis there may also be bleeding and discharge from the gums. Treatment of gingivitis consists of cleaning and polishing the teeth to remove built-up plaque. Routine brushing is essential to controlling this problem.

You will also want to examine your cat's teeth for fractures. Unfortunately, cats sometimes eat things that are not tooth-friendly. If the object chewed is harder than the tooth, a fracture may occur.

Broken teeth with nerve exposure will result in pain and infection at the tooth’s tip. This will also allow food and bacteria to travel within the root and may eventually affect your cat’s vital organs. Fractured teeth are treated by extraction, thus removing the source of infection and pain.

Many cats older than four years of age will also have FORLs (feline oral resorptive lesions). These are similar to cavities in humans, but are not exactly the same. FORLs commonly occur at or just under the gum line and may not be visible without a dental X-ray. If your cat will allow it, gently press a Q-tip to the gum line around the outside of the teeth. If your cat starts quivering and chattering, a FORL is probably present. These lesions are painful for the cat and the tooth should be extracted.

Monthly oral exams can uncover several hidden diseases and the more you look, the more you may find. If abnormalities are found, your veterinarian should be called for treatment.

**How can I brush my cat’s teeth?**

Brushing a cat's teeth can be an easy and fun procedure, if approached in an upbeat and gentle manner. To prevent calculus accumulation, your cat's teeth should be brushed at least three times weekly. Daily brushing is optimal.

First, acclimate your cat to having his/her mouth worked with. Start by scratching the side of the cat's face and gradually slip a finger under the lip to gently rub the teeth and gums. Try this daily for two weeks and always pair it with something pleasant, like a treat reserved only for tooth brushing or extra playtime. Approach your cat calmly and be sure to keep the sessions short. Five to ten front and back swipes on each side will do. Concentrate on the canine teeth and the outside surface of the upper cheek teeth.

When your cat is comfortable with this, try introducing feline enzymatic toothpaste. Do not use human toothpaste as it contains detergents that your cat should not swallow. Eventually, you will want to introduce a small, angled brush or a rubber finger brush as well. Most cats will accept gentle brushing, but some may not. If your cat becomes aggressive during your attempts, call it quits and ask your veterinarian about alternative oral care.

**How often should I have my cat’s teeth cleaned by the veterinarian?**

It depends on the degree of plaque and calculus accumulation on your cat's teeth. This is influenced by three factors: genetics, diet and home care. You should examine your pet’s teeth monthly. Look for an accumulation of yellow or brown material at the area where the tooth meets the gum line, especially over the cheek teeth and canines.

Bacteria associated with plaque irritates the gum tissues, causing gingivitis. When treated, this inflammation will resolve. Mild gingivitis may respond well to home oral care, but moderate and severe gingivitis will require cleaning below the gum line under anesthesia.

When gingivitis is left untreated, it progresses to periodontal disease, which is non-curable but can be managed with intensive care at home and intermittent dental cleanings under anesthesia. Intervals between teeth cleaning procedures will depend on how often you brush the teeth. Daily cleaning is optimal. If you cannot brush at home, your pet may require multiple cleanings per year.

**What is best to feed my cat?**

Hard, dry food will help remove plaque from the teeth. For owners who cannot brush or for animals that have a tendency to build plaque quickly, several diets are approved by the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) to help keep cats' teeth clean. These include Hill’s Prescription Diet Feline t/d, Hill's Science Diet Feline Adult Oral Care and Purina Veterinary Diets DH (Dental Health) Feline. CET chews are also recommended by veterinary dentists and have been shown to be beneficial, though no controlled studies have been performed. CET toothpastes and chews contain enzymes that help kill the bacteria associated with plaque.

**When do I have to start worrying about dental problems with my cat?**

As soon as kitten teeth emerge, it is time to start brushing. Although these teeth will eventually be replaced, an early introduction to brushing will make home dental care easy for the rest of the cat's life.