



Toothy Thomson Handout

Oral Home Care

Daily oral home care is an integral part of keeping companion animals' mouths healthy. All pet parents should try and incorporate toothbrushing into their daily routine with their pet.

The goal of toothbrushing is to disrupt the plaque biofilm that forms on your pet's teeth, just like yours, and prevent it from mineralizing into calculus (tartar). Since plaque appears within hours and calculus can form in as little as 24 hours, disrupting the plaque biofilm *daily* is critical to stay ahead of plaque and calculus buildup. Daily toothbrushing means the biofilm is disrupted every day and it will help in significantly reducing calculus on your pet's teeth long term.

Toothbrushing should not be a "fight" with your pet. Before starting this activity ensure they have an oral exam (ideally an anesthetized exam; COHAT) to confirm there is nothing painful in their oral cavity. This is very important as brushing diseased teeth will likely lead to pain and a negative association with toothbrushing. Making toothbrushing positive is the most important part of the routine.



Kai gives his new toothbrush a quick check before his daily brush. He willingly and eagerly comes to the kitchen for his toothbrushing which is quickly followed by dinner.

Ideally, starting when your pet is a puppy or kitten is the easiest way to get them used to toothbrushing, but you can start at any age.

Start SLOW. Make it as positive as possible, make it routine and do not give up after a few tries. When using their favourite positive reinforcements following toothbrushing, your pet will quickly learn that the toothbrush means food or a favourite activity and will learn to either love it or tolerate it.

Unlike in humans, cavities are rare in companion animals; 0% in cats and less than 5% in dogs. Toothbrushing *before* feeding is absolutely OK.

In fact, following toothbrushing with a tasty treat will help keep it positive and increase your pet's desire to have this performed.

To increase your pet's tolerance for toothbrushing it is recommended to focus on the outside surfaces of the teeth. This way, you can keep their mouth closed; pets usually prefer when their tongues aren't touched. Additionally, it is easier to brush when they are not trying to chew the brush.

For toothbrushing, use your non-dominant hand to gently keep their mouth closed by putting your index finger on their muzzle or forehead and your thumb under their chin. Try not to cover their eyes. With gentle pressure keep their mouth closed, slip the toothbrush inside the cheek on one side and brush back and forth a few times then switch sides and do a few more back and forth. Finish by doing a few swipes of the front teeth and follow that with a lot of praise, their favourite treat, a meal or a favourite toy/activity.

The first time you do this, the toothbrush might only touch a tooth, and then follow that with the reward. The next day you might get 1 sweep in. By the next week, you might be up to doing both sides. Always reward your pet after the toothbrush touches teeth. Do not give up and within a few months, your pet will be the one *reminding you* it is toothbrush and treat time.



Price's first toothbrushing; the thumb gently keeps the mouth closed, the toothbrush slides between the teeth and cheek and this is followed by praise and liver treats.

Advanced toothbrushing of the inside surfaces can be considered if your pet allows it. You can place a toy in their mouth for them to hold it open while you brush the inside surfaces. This is difficult, and may not be tolerated by your pet. Therefore, doing the outside surfaces *daily* is significantly better than occasionally brushing all surfaces. It will help tremendously and pets tolerate it very well.

Many veterinary clinics and most pet stores will sell pet toothbrushes; they usually have longer handles to help reach the back of the mouth. They come in various sizes and you should select one based on your pet's needs; cats and labradors do not need the same size toothbrush. Any **soft** bristle or pediatric toothbrush is also appropriate.

Toothpaste can be used in pets. Do not use toothpaste meant for humans for your dog or cat. Our toothpastes have artificial sweeteners (xylitol) and fluoride which should not be ingested by pets.

There are several dog and cat toothpaste options at both veterinary clinics and pet stores. Some are flavoured to please your pet (beef, chicken) others that your pet might enjoy that you will also prefer the smell (vanilla, mint).

Toothpaste is not a requirement for toothbrushing to be effective.

Disrupting the biofilm with the bristles is what is most important. As such, if toothpaste gets in the way, because your pet is too busy licking it, does not like it or allergies are a concern, it does

not need to be used. But if the toothpaste is what motivates your pet to allow you to brush; then using it is helpful and appropriate. If you are not using toothpaste, soak the bristles in water before brushing.

For oral home care there is no better alternative to toothbrushing. Plaque and calculus reduction happens by disrupting the biofilm and the bristled toothbrush accomplishes that if used daily.

Some products can help reduce plaque and/or calculus, these include water additives, treats, food and toys. The number of products that claim to reduce plaque or calculus can be overwhelming and confusing for pet parents. And unfortunately, companies can make a lot of claims without any proof.

Therefore, I recommend visiting the Veterinary Oral Health Council (vohc.org) where the listed products have been researched and are proven to do what they claim on the label.

While chewing on hard toys or treats *may* reduce plaque or calculus, if they are too hard, they **WILL** break teeth. Fractured teeth are painful and are a risk of infection.

Anything you offer your pet to chew on should bend or break when force is applied at both ends and you should be able to indent it with your thumbnail. All bones and antlers are too hard; they will break teeth.

Toothbrushing and any other oral home care will never remove the need for veterinary oral care. Your dog or cat should have an annual COHAT. Toothbrushing, even when done thoroughly or efficiently is not perfect; if it was, you also wouldn't need to go to the dentist. In the same way, if water additives or chewing on something would completely remove all oral disease; our dentists would recommend them.

This means that your pet needs to see their vet or a veterinary dentist yearly for a Complete Oral Health Assessment and Treatment (COHAT*). Toothbrushing is something you can do at home in between COHATs to help manage plaque and calculus and it may extend the time between COHATs.

However, toothbrushing or not, COHATs should still be a part of your pet's oral health plan.



Above are two dogs of similar age (less than 1 yr). Note the significant calculus and plaque on the puppy on the right and almost no calculus on the puppy on the left who had a daily toothbrushing routine at home.

Toothbrushing *daily* is the best thing you can do for your pet at home for their oral health. Make sure your pet does not have oral pain before starting and then make it a routine and very *positive*. It will never replace the need for COHATs but may help maintain oral health between them and overall decrease the severity of disease and the amount of teeth lost.