

Perilous to Your Pet's Well-Being – Yet Widely Ignored by Their Humans

You're busy, so no wonder you overlook this. Yet it's critical to your pet's well-being. Here are the 9 pivotal signs you're ignoring it — triggering chronic pain and infection, dumping bacteria into their bloodstream, and causing undue immune stress. How to correct course today.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- By the age of 2, 80% of dogs and 70% of cats have some form of periodontal disease
- Untreated periodontal disease is painful to your pet, puts stress on his immune system and increases the risk of chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes
- In addition to a species-appropriate diet and plaque-removing bones, regular brushing can help to keep your pet's teeth clean and minimize dental issues
- If your pet is new to brushing, start gradually by touching your pet's muzzle, then moving onto the lips, gums and teeth; use your finger first, then gauze, then a finger brush and finally a pet toothbrush
- As in humans, your pet's oral health is tied to his overall health. Inflamed gums and diseased teeth are painful to your pet, but in addition they are dangerous to his well-being

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published November 25, 2016.

Brushing your pet's teeth may not be high on your list of daily to-dos, but it takes only a few minutes and has the potential to drastically improve your pet's overall health. In fact, it's one of the most powerful ways to take a proactive role in keeping your pet healthy, and it also happens to be one of the simplest.

If this sounds incredulous to you, keep reading. Much to many pet owners' surprise, it's entirely possible to brush your pet's teeth — even your cat's — without a related wrestling match.

And while it's true that this hygiene step is best started when your pet is very young, it's possible to teach virtually any age pet to enjoy a daily brushing. Here's how.

How to Get Your Pet Used to the Idea of Brushing His Teeth

Ideally, start desensitizing your pet's mouth as soon as you bring your new baby bundle home. Young pets will be more receptive of you gently touching his mouth as a part of his daily routine.

If you start young, a daily brushing will be just another part of your pet's day (keep in mind that if your pet is in the midst of losing baby teeth, his mouth may be sore and you may need to take a break from brushing until his permanent teeth come in).

If you didn't start young, or you've adopted an older pet and want to start brushing, start slowly. Pick a time of day when the brushing will take place (such as right before bed) and stick with it. This will help establish a routine.

Incorporate face massage (and mouth desensitization) into regular massage/petting time. This will put your pet into a relaxed state of mind, rather than your pet being suspicious you're up to something by suddenly trying to manipulate her mouth.

After your pet is cool with having her head, ears and chin touched, move on to touch his muzzle, then his lips. Many pets really enjoy having their gums lightly massaged when they're relaxing. The key is not to force it, move at a pace that keeps your pet feeling comfortable and relaxed.

When you've mastered the gum massage, it's an easy transition to simply incorporate his teeth into the mix. Dipping your finger in bone broth is a trick that will make your pet much more receptive to you coming near his mouth.

DVM 360 offered another good trick that may make your pet actually look forward to teeth cleaning: dip a soft washcloth or piece of gauze into the broth and use it to gently rub your pet's teeth and massage his gums.¹

The goal is to simply get your pet familiar with you rubbing his teeth and gums, and to learn that this isn't something to be afraid of.

Moving on to Enzymatic Tooth Solutions and Brushes

Eventually, consider using an enzymatic tooth solution designed for pets. Enzymatic gels help to break down the plaque and tartar that accumulates on the surface of teeth. Put a dab on your finger and very briefly massage it into your pet's back molars.

Next, try a dab on a piece of gauze wrapped around your finger. Once your pet is comfortable with you rubbing gauze on his teeth and gums, you can move on to using a finger brush and finally onto a pet toothbrush.

Older pets really do benefit from a daily brushing, but if your pet is younger even brushing several times a week will be beneficial.

'But Dogs and Cats Don't Brush Their Teeth in the Wild'

This is a common comment from pet owners wondering why it's necessary to brush their pet's teeth. It's true that in the wild animals don't have toothbrushes, but they also eat a wild, aka fresh, raw and species-appropriate, diet.

This will help to keep their teeth healthy, to some extent, as chewing the bones helps to scrape away tartar and plaque on their teeth.

The cartilage, ligaments and tendons in the raw meat also act as a natural dental floss. This is one of the benefits of such a diet, and why it's recommended you also feed your pet a diet that's as fresh and species-appropriate as possible.

That being said, animals in the wild still develop problems with their teeth and your pet, even if he is fed the best diet possible, may as well.

Brachycephalic (short-nosed) and toy breeds are often predisposed to dental problems because their teeth don't have normal alignment, and in the case of tiny dogs, there's often a crowding problem.

Pets with chronic health conditions and many cats are also predisposed to tartar accumulation on their teeth, even when consuming a fresh, ancestral diet.

You can absolutely reduce the rate of tartar buildup by offering a raw-food diet and all-natural, high-quality dental chew bones or raw bones, but some dogs will still suffer from serious tartar build up and inflamed gums regardless of what you feed or they chew.

Some pets that eat a raw, bone-based diet their whole lives develop dental disease by 2 years of age because of genetics (weak, porous enamel). And some animals can't be offered bony foods or recreational bones due to other health issues.

The common sense approach is to look at your pet's teeth regularly and assist them in removing any debris accumulating on their teeth the minute you notice it. It's estimated that by the age of 2, 80% of dogs and 70% of cats have some form of periodontal disease.² These stats are much lower for fresh-fed animals, but unfortunately you can't assume that an awesome diet will eliminate all dental disease.

Regular brushing can help to keep your pet's teeth clean and minimize dental issues, along with keeping the need for professional dental cleaning (under anesthesia) to a minimum.

Why Your Pet's Oral Health Is So Important

As in humans, your pet's oral health is tied to his overall health. Inflamed gums and diseased teeth are painful to your pet, but in addition they are dangerous to his well-being.

The bacteria in your pet's mouth can easily enter his bloodstream, leading to systemic illness, including heart disease and diabetes, both of which are linked to gum disease. Further, as noted by Dr. René Carlson, president of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA):

"Untreated periodontal infections often lead to more serious health problems because of chronic pain and infection, and subsequent stress on the immune system ... These untreated conditions can then lead to heart valve disease, kidney disease and even diabetes and cancer, not to mention the significant discomfort associated with dental infections."

Signs of periodontal disease or other oral health problems in pets include:

- Bad breath
- Drooling
- Difficulty chewing
- Mouth sensitivity
- Pawing at the mouth

- Red or bleeding gums
- Loose teeth or lost teeth
- Loss of appetite
- Depressed or irritable mood

Even with regular brushing, it's important to schedule regular oral exams with your vet and professional cleanings under anesthesia as required. If you notice any of the signs above, however, you should take your pet in to be evaluated as soon as possible.

Sources and References

¹ [DVM 360 February 29, 2016 \(Archived\)](#)

² [AVMA February 1, 2012](#)
