

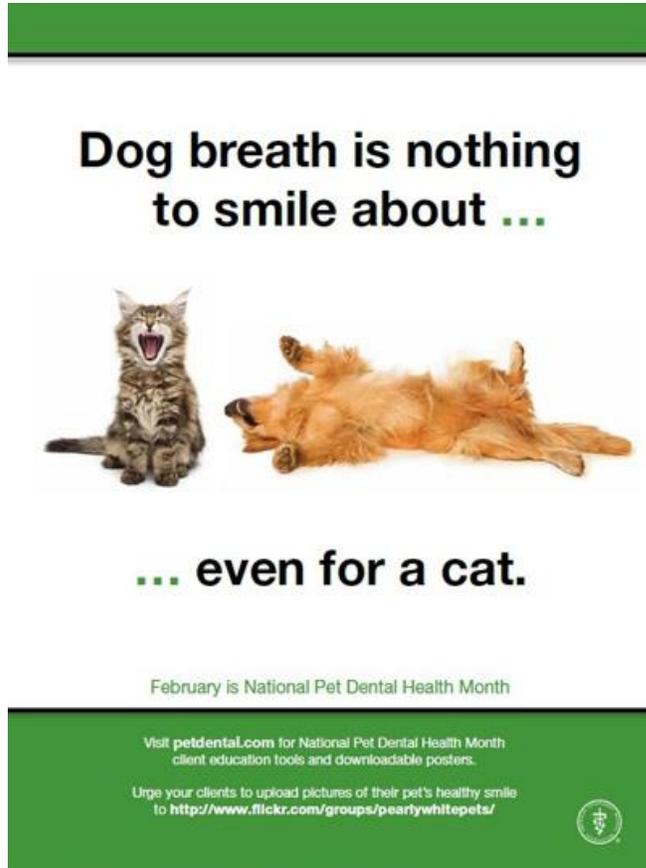
Keep Those Pearly Whites – and Your Dogs – Healthy

By Christi McDonald

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I know that you know that keeping our dogs' teeth clean is as important to their health as anything we do for them. But I was at my veterinarian's office this week and noticed the poster for "National Pet Dental Health Month," and because I've recently learned a few new things about how dental disease affects dogs (and humans) I want to share this information with you.



February is "National Pet Dental Health Month," sponsored by the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Every professional handler I know, and probably most owner-handlers as well, scrape their dogs' teeth weekly with a basic tooth scaler, so that when the judge examines the bite he'll find a beautiful set of pearly whites looking back at him. But there are a lot more reasons for keeping our dogs' teeth clean than just impressing judges at the dog show.



Keeping your dogs' teeth clean is more than prepping for judges' bite examinations.

Neglect Can Lead to Disease

Good breeders advise the folks who buy puppies from us about all of the ways they can keep their dog healthy for its lifetime, including taking care of its teeth. We need to take our own advice as well. We know that over time, if we do nothing to keep our dogs' teeth clean, plaque builds up that, if left untreated, hardens and becomes tartar. A buildup of tartar typically leads to gingivitis, with red, swollen gums.

Just like humans, the canine mouth environment normally includes beneficial bacteria that help keep the dog's entire system in balance. But with time gingivitis can lead to an imbalance in bacteria – an overabundance of what can then be called “bad bacteria” that will eventually lead to periodontal disease. Now the dog's gums are not only red and swollen, but probably quite painful, and tooth loss will become more likely.

Of course, infection can also lead to tooth abscess, just like in humans, and this can be painful. Unfortunately, our dogs can't tell us when their mouths hurt. I feel certain that they live with pain from irritated gums and even infected teeth much more often than we realize.

In addition to the above, though, what dog owners need to know is that this overgrowth of bacteria – and the associated infection – can also cause those bacteria to enter the bloodstream and deposit in the heart valves, possibly leading eventually to heart malfunction. Bacteria from the mouth can also cause problems in the kidney and liver. Both diabetes and strokes in dogs have been linked to dental disease.

Although you may not be immediately aware of it, each of these instances can have a serious negative effect on the overall health of your dogs and ultimately can shorten their lives.



Although smaller breeds seem more prone to dental disease, it is important to care for the teeth of all dogs to prevent dental-related health problems.

Without a doubt, the smaller breeds of dogs are typically more prone to dental problems than larger breeds. This is in part due to the fact that smaller jaw bones mean that the teeth are anchored less deeply, and thus may be more easily lost when dental disease progresses. Believe it or not, long-term dental disease in smaller dogs can lead to such a weakening of the jawbone underlying the teeth that fractures are not uncommon. Healing a broken jaw can be a very difficult process in a dog.

Prevention Is Job One

So other than giving our dogs bones, biscuits and other treats designed to help keep their teeth clean, what should we do to keep their mouths healthy?

I know many people who have fed raw diets to their dogs, including large bones that come straight from the butcher, and I'm told that the gnawing on those bones does a good job of keeping teeth clean, just as it would do in the wild if your dog had to catch and kill his own food! But with many dogs that are being shown, and even retired show dogs that are being bred or kept as house pets, it is simply impossible to keep their teeth healthy just by feeding bones or treats.

Because most of us have more than one dog – sometimes many more – the thought of brushing their teeth every day may seem daunting or even absurd. But the truth is that especially for smaller dogs, this really is the best way to assure that they don't end up with dental disease. And most veterinarians I've spoken to insist that brushing teeth once a week is no good. Most of them recommend daily brushing.

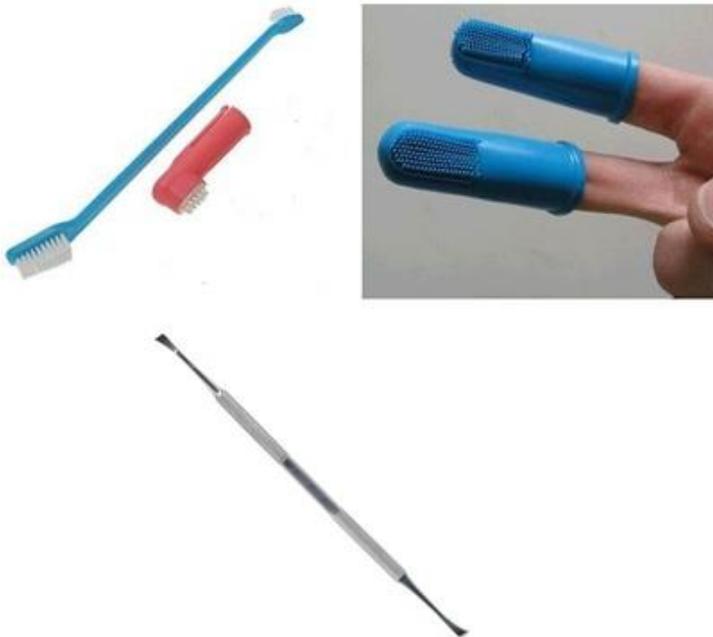
What about the sprays, gels and water additives on the market that claim to kill bacteria that cause tartar buildup? Again, many veterinarians will tell you that all of these things will help prevent buildup of plaque and tartar and an imbalance of bacteria, but that they must be used in combination with regular brushing.

Nearly all of the premium dog food brands now sell a dental formula of some kind, some created especially for small dogs. One dental diet is created with natural vegetable fibers that the company says help scrape the plaque from dogs' teeth. All the premium foods' dental formulas that I investigated say primarily that it is the shape, size and/or texture of the kibble itself that is designed to reduce plaque buildup. At least one company also claims to have a formula with extra antioxidants. Some vets recommend mixing dental diet dog food with your dog's regular food to help stave off disease.

Getting Down to the Nitty-Gritty

As mentioned earlier, the best thing you can do for your dog is to brush her teeth, daily or at least four or five times a week. I have three small dogs of my own, and I know the thought of brushing their teeth every day seems overwhelming. One is just a puppy, so right now her teeth look great. (On one occasion she used a good pair of leather shoes to shine those nice white teeth!) But after my two older girls get their annual dental cleanings in a couple of weeks, I'm committed to brushing all of their teeth four times a week. I'm also going to invest in one of the dental gels and use it weekly, for good measure.

Getting started is the hard part, but there are ways to make the process less of a struggle for both you and your dog. Taking it slowly is the best advice I've found for introducing a dog to tooth brushing.



Tools for keeping your dogs' teeth clean might include a double-ended soft dog toothbrush, one of several designs of finger brushes that can have synthetic or rubber bristles and a tooth scaler.

First off, never, ever use human toothpaste on your dog. The ingredients that cause it to foam in the human mouth may cause stomach upset at worst and will be unpleasant at best for your dog. Use dog toothpaste, which comes in flavors such as beef or chicken that won't cause your dog to turn up her nose.

Always use a soft brush, never medium or hard, preferably one designed for dogs, or the rubber gum massager device that you place over the end of your finger. Dog toothpaste and toothbrushes can be found in pet specialty stores, some big box stores or at your veterinary clinic. They're also widely available online.

I find tooth scrapers to be invaluable as well and keep them in my tack box, but hopefully if you develop a habit of brushing your dogs' teeth, the scraper will be needed less often!

Show dogs are already accustomed to having someone look in their mouths, so we have one leg up on getting started with this new habit. The easiest way to get your dog to accept tooth brushing on a regular basis is to introduce him slowly, just to the toothpaste at first, by giving him a taste of the meat-flavored product, followed by a treat that he loves and lots of praise and stroking. I'm told that most dogs quite like the taste, and it is like another treat to them.



You can get your dog used to the toothbrush by letting him lick the meat-flavored paste off of it before you attempt to brush his teeth.

Continue to make the association between his favorite treats, your praise and the toothpaste. Rub a bit of the paste onto his teeth and gums for a day or two. Then you can introduce the brush by allowing him to lick the toothpaste off of a toothbrush, again with treats and praise.



Always use a soft brush designed for dogs and brush gently. Get in and get out fairly quickly for best results!

If you'll let your dog lie across your lap as you acclimate him to this process, hopefully in time he'll enjoy the attention enough that he won't struggle when you actually brush his teeth. As one veterinarian said to me, though, "Get in and get out as quickly as you can! Prolonging the process just gives your dog the opportunity to resist." Quickly but gently brush all of the outside surfaces of the teeth near the gum line, and then you're done. No need to rinse, as dog toothpastes are designed to be rinse-free. And there's no need to brush the teeth on the inside, as the dog's tongue keeps those surfaces fairly clean.

My theory is that building the good habit of gently brushing my dogs' teeth most evenings might take us some time, but it will be well worth it in the end. It's something you can do to keep your dogs feeling their best, and also to help them live longer lives.

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