

Brushing Up

Why (and how) you should brush your dog's teeth.

BY LISA RODIER

The good news: you can give your dog a thorough brush job in just two minutes a day. The bad news: few dogs fancy having their teeth brushed, and there ain't no Holy Grail of Canine Tooth Brushing, despite my attempts to extract one from Angela Mees, DVM, who owns a practice limited to veterinary dentistry in suburban Atlanta.

I'm guilty of not brushing my dog Atle's teeth. But after talking with Dr. Mees, who is working toward becoming a fellow in the Academy of Veterinary Dentistry, I've reconsidered my sloth.

OUNCE OF PREVENTION

Brushing removes plaque, the sticky, colorless film that forms on teeth. Bacteria live in plaque and secrete acids that cause tooth decay and irritate gum tissue, leading to gingivitis (gum disease) and periodontal disease. Plaque begins to calcify after 48 hours so, while daily brushing is best, brushing your dog's teeth every other day is still very useful.

The only way to remove tartar (calculus) is with a cleaning by a veterinarian; brushing buys you extra time between professional cleanings. Dr. Mees explains, "If you go a year with just professional cleaning and no brushing, you're more likely to see periodontal disease. I tell people to think about their own mouths — we brush twice a day, we floss daily, and most people get cleanings twice a year."

Some dogs are more prone to periodontal disease — including Greyhounds, small breeds, and brachycephalic breeds — but, just as with humans, some dogs

naturally have better oral health than others, even within the same breed and family.

Keeping plaque and tartar at bay to ward off oral disease is just the tip of the iceberg; your dog's liver, kidney, heart, and overall immune system are affected by the condition of her teeth and gums. Brushing is some of the best preventive, holistic "medicine" we can employ to maintain the health of our dog.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Dr. Mees is a fan of simplicity; her tool of choice is a children's soft toothbrush. If you have a very large dog, she

recommends an adult extra soft brush, explaining, "People mistakenly think the heftier the bristle, the better the job. You want something very soft because the gingiva (gums) are very sensitive."

If your dog is worried about the brush, start with just your finger then move to a brush. While finger brush products aren't bad, they have thick bristles that make it difficult to get under the gum line. Some of Dr. Mees' clients have reported success with an electric toothbrush, but in her experience, that sort of horsepower tends to scare most dogs.

As for toothpaste? Simply wet the toothbrush with water and forego the paste. Many dogs try to eat paste by chewing the toothbrush, making the brushing job a whole lot harder for us. Dr. Mees says toothpaste is a major reason why people often unknowingly struggle and give up on brushing; we think we have to use it — and we don't! Want the benefit of the enzymes in canine toothpaste? Try using it as a treat after you brush your dog's teeth. (Note: Be sure to use a product formulated for dogs, not humans.)

HOW TO START

If your dog has signs of gum disease — puffy, red, or bleeding gums — wait to introduce a brushing routine until after you've taken your dog to a veterinarian for a professional cleaning. If her gums are painful and you brush, the dog may develop a negative association with the whole process and you'll fail.

Otherwise, if your dog's mouth is in good health, Dr. Mees' advice is to start

For the upper back teeth, put the wet brush in the dog's cheek, and, gently holding her muzzle, close her mouth and brush. Closing the mouth controls the dog's tongue, reducing any struggle with brushing.



slowly – very slowly – and make the experience positive. I've found that's the right approach since introducing Atle to the activity. The first time I touched the brush to his front tooth – and that's all I did – he jumped like I'd put a hot prod up his backside (I actually think it tickled). On day one, and even day two, all I did was gently touch the tooth. Will some dogs open wide and say more, more, more? Probably, but from talking with Dr. Mees, that's the exception, not the rule.

Make brushing a daily routine; the more your dog becomes accustomed to the routine, the better it will go. And don't use force. For Dr. Mees, it's important that your approach be gentle, but firm, and not interfere with your bond with your dog.

She's a big advocate of using praise, treats – whatever your dog responds to in terms of positive reinforcement – during and after brushing, especially in the introductory stages, much like doing a dog's nails, or touching a dog who is uncomfortable with touch (see "Touch Me, Touch Me Not," WDJ August 2004, for step-by-step directions on using classical conditioning to get your dog to accept and enjoy something he previously disliked).

THE MECHANICS OF BRUSHING

Start by figuring out what position will be most comfortable for both you and your dog. For Dr. Mees and her Greyhound, that's standing. This lets Dr. Mees reach around behind the dog, and works well for them. Smaller dogs might be happy to sit in your lap. For Atle, I've found that having him lie on his side works best.

Where to start? Dr. Mees advises that one approach is to divide the dog's mouth into four quadrants, tackling one at a time. She begins with her dog's front teeth because they're easiest to reach. Wherever you choose to begin, start with a wet brush, and gently work each area as follows, with pressure light enough that the bristles barely bend:

■ To brush the front teeth, gently pull back the dog's lips.

■ For the upper back teeth, put the brush in the dog's cheek, and, gently holding her muzzle, close her mouth and brush. Closing the mouth controls

the dog's tongue, reducing any struggle with brushing.

■ For the lower back teeth, release your hold on the muzzle a bit, slightly open the dog's mouth, and brush the bottom back teeth.

Dr. Mees admits that getting the insides of the teeth is difficult, so don't get discouraged if you can't (the dog's tongue tends to keep the inner sides of the teeth clean). And don't be concerned about brushing your dog's tongue and roof of her mouth.

In what direction should you brush? Dr. Mees explains, "We're taught circular motions, but I think if you try circular motions in a moving animal, you're going to get frustrated! So I usually recommend side to side."

In a perfect world, you'll gradually work up to brushing each quadrant for about 30 seconds. Nonetheless, Dr. Mees acknowledges that you might not achieve that. She gets about five to ten seconds per quadrant on her own dog, so she brushes once quickly, then tries to repeat one or two more times.

Any amount of brushing is better than none; you will see better results in your dog's oral health, even with a dog who won't tolerate a total of more than 20 to 40 seconds, than if you never brushed. Do as much as he will handle to start, then gradually see if you can do a little more. I'm at day five with Atle, and I've been able to begin brushing his back upper and lower teeth. We're still just talking a matter of seconds, and he's not entirely thrilled, but that's OK. I'm not in a hurry, and he's getting lots of treats and praise for what he gives me.

After brushing, thoroughly rinse the

brush and let it air dry. It's a good idea to replace your dog's toothbrush every three to six months, and use a separate toothbrush for each of your dogs to prevent the spread of germs.

SIGNS OF TROUBLE

If your dog has pain during brushing or you see blood, stop. It could be gingivitis, which is reversible with a professional cleaning and brushing. But if the problem is periodontal disease, advanced professional veterinary dental care is in order.

Overzealous brushing or brushing multiple times a day can cause gum erosion. More is not better!

If your dog gets aggressive or tries to bite you when you introduce brushing, Dr. Mees does not recommend pushing through. Your route, instead, may be more frequent professional cleanings, and the use of other products such as water additives and chew toys.

However, if your dog unhappily tolerates the process, keep it up (and try to reward him more richly for his cooperation). In most cases, Dr. Mees says that people struggle with, then give up on, brushing their dog's teeth too soon. The misconception is that because their dog doesn't like it, they should quit. "We tend to baby our animals; if we perceive that the animal is not enjoying it, we're not going to do it. But, then people get to my office, we have to pull teeth, and they're mad. I explain that you can't have it both ways; we've got to use a little bit of tough love with our dogs sometimes." Their health depends on it! ✦

Lisa Rodier lives in Georgia with her husband and Atle the Bouvier, and volunteers with the American Bouvier Rescue League.

RESOURCES

❖ ANGELA MEES, DVM

Atlanta Veterinary Dental Services
(770) 552-8777; atlantaveterinarydentistry.com

❖ AMERICAN VETERINARY DENTAL COLLEGE (AVDC)

The AVDC is the clinical specialist organization for veterinary dentists, recognized by the AVMA's American Board of Veterinary Specialties. avdc.org

❖ ACADEMY OF VETERINARY DENTISTRY (AVD)

An international organization of veterinarians with a special interest in the dental care of animals. avdonline.org