

Preventive Dental Home Care for Your Dog

Home oral hygiene can make a tremendous difference in your dog's comfort and health. There are several home care oral hygiene options from which to choose, but keep in mind that anything you can do to help prevent plaque and tartar accumulation will pay big dividends. What really matters is whether or not home oral hygiene will be provided over the long haul – considerable effort applied only for a short period or only occasionally will be of no long-term benefit.

Listed below some commonly used options for home oral hygiene that have been proven to be of benefit for dogs. Combining several methods will achieve the best results. All methods of home oral hygiene share the goal of preventing or controlling periodontal disease by minimizing plaque (bacterial film) accumulation, and preventing the mineralization of the plaque to form calculus ("tartar").

BRUSHING and TOOTH-PASTES: Brushing your dog's teeth is the single most effective means to maintain oral health between professional dental examinations. This makes sense because the bacterial film known as "plaque" is the cause of periodontal disease. This film is easily disrupted by the simple mechanical effect of brushing the teeth. Frequent (ideally daily) brushing is recommended to maintain optimal dental health. Almost all dogs will eventually accept brushing. The key to success is to be patient and gradual in your approach, brushing mainly the outsides of the "cheek teeth" located under the upper lip. A dog that resists brushing frequently may have painful areas in the mouth that need to be addressed.

A variety of products safe for pets are available in the marketplace. If you use a brush and a dentifrice, AVDC recommends pet-specific toothpastes. These come in flavors that dogs accept, such as poultry and seafood. Avoid human toothpastes as they often contain abrasives and high-foaming detergents that should not be swallowed or inhaled by dogs.

Toothbrushes designed for dogs are soft and angled to assist in brushing the back teeth. Some dogs prefer finger brushes. A variety of "dental wipes" containing different products are available. The single-use wipes are rubbed daily on the outside of the teeth to remove plaque.

CHLORHEXIDINE ORAL RINSE and GEL: Chlorhexidine is the most effective anti-plaque antiseptic. Chlorhexidine binds to the oral tissues and tooth surfaces, and is gradually released into the oral cavity. It is safe for pets and rarely causes problems, though it does have a bitter taste if palatability enhancers suitable for dogs are not included. Some dogs may object to the taste of products containing chlorhexidine while others accept it with no difficulty. The rinse is applied by squirting a small amount inside the cheek on each side of the mouth. The gel is applied by smearing it onto the teeth. The tongue and lips will spread the rinse or gel around the mouth.

DIETS and CHEWS: Several "dental diets" have been shown to be of benefit in decreasing dental disease. Some employ a specific kibble design and others include a chemical anti-tartar poly-phosphate ingredient. Rawhide products and chew treats can be helpful if chewed daily, and some rawhide chews and biscuits contain an anti-tartar ingredient. Palatability is important – chewing every day is the ideal. Dogs are carnivores – they chew on bones in the wild. However, AVDC does not recommend cow hooves, dried natural bones or hard nylon products because they are too hard and do not mimic the effect of a dog tearing meat off a carcass. These hard products are associated with broken teeth or damaged gums.

Chew toys are only of benefit if they are played with frequently and over the long haul – you can increase the dog's willingness to chew by smearing palatable peanut butter or soft cheese on the product. Pet dogs should be monitored while chewing a chew treat or toy, as they may swallow large pieces, leading to a variety of digestive system disorders.

The **Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC)** Seal of Acceptance is awarded to home oral hygiene products that meet or exceed the VOHC standard for retarding accumulation of dental plaque or dental tartar. A complete listing of products that have been granted the VOHC Seal of Acceptance is available at www.VOHC.org – click the Products Awarded the VOHC Seal link. The VOHC web site also features additional information about dental disease in pets, and there are other pages on the AVDC web site that may be helpful (periodontal disease, professional dental scaling, anesthesia-free dental scaling) AVDC Diplomates are familiar with available home oral hygiene products and can help tailor a specific home care regimen best suited to you and your pet.

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