



Oak House Veterinary Centre



What to use to clean your cat's teeth

When planning to brush your cat's teeth it is important to use the correct equipment. Never use human dental products on a cat. Specific animal dental products are readily available – ask your vet.





You will need:

- **Toothbrush** – a suitable toothbrush for cats, and a separate toothbrush for each cat as saliva can be a major route for cross-infection.
- **Veterinary/cat toothpaste** – cat toothpaste is very different from human toothpaste, and human toothpaste would be unpalatable for cats and may cause gastric irritation. Cat toothpaste usually comes in multiple flavours such as chicken, beef, fish or mint – you can try different flavours to find out which one your cat may like best.

Cat dental home care 'starter kits' are sometimes available. Some of these contain a 'finger brush' (a type of brush that you put on the end of a finger) rather than a regular toothbrush. These should be used with extreme caution though, and are probably best avoided in most cases to reduce the risk of being bitten!

How to brush your cat's teeth

Performing dental home care can be approached in the following way:

- For the first couple of days, build up your cat's trust by placing a small amount of toothpaste onto your finger and offering it to him/her. Some cats will instantly love the taste while others may be a bit reluctant. If reluctant, try placing a tiny amount onto your cat's nose. He/she will hopefully lick it off and usually, once they have had a taste of it they will take it from your hand.
- It is useful to use the first couple of days to familiarise yourself with how you are going to hold your cat's head when brushing. To avoid startling your cat, try this when your cat is sleepy and at a



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different time to when you will brush. If possible try this several times a day, as you will be more confident when it comes to brushing the teeth.

- It is usually better to have your cat with its back towards you rather than approaching him/her from the front. Not only is this less confrontational for the cat, but if your cat wriggles they will usually move backwards, towards you, and you will have better control.
- Spread your hand wide, as a firm but gentle grip is needed, and place the palm of your hand on top of your cat's head but towards the back, and use your thumb and second finger to grip around the cheekbone under the eyes. Your index finger should be lifted so not to cover your cat's eyes.
- Gently tilt your cat's head upwards a little and use your thumb to gently lift your cat's upper lip
- Use the thumb or finger on your other hand to gently pull down your cat's lower lip – this should give you a good view of all of one side of your cat's teeth.
- For the next 2-3 days, hold your cat's head in the same way, but instead of using your second hand to hold the lower lip down, apply some toothpaste to a cotton bud and gently rub the toothpaste onto the teeth in a circular motion.
 - Start at the back teeth as these are usually the ones that are the most difficult to reach but the most important to brush. Gradually work your way forwards until reaching the long canine teeth.
 - If your cat tries to obstruct you with its feet, ask someone to hold your cat's front legs or, if you are by yourself, it may be easier to wrap your cat in a towel or blanket.
 - It is far better to try to get your cat used to having its mouth touched by repeating these steps little and often until you feel ready to progress to the next stage.
- Finally, you can start using the toothbrush. The procedure is the same; moving in small circular motions and starting from the back. Start by brushing for approximately ten seconds each side but gradually increase the time to 30-45 seconds each side. When you



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first start to brush the teeth there may be a small amount of gum bleeding. This is common and you will find that as you brush more regularly the bleeding will stop as the gums become healthier.

- If you find that a couple of days at each stage is too quick for your cat then take as many days as you need for your cat to adapt and feel comfortable with the procedure. The main thing is to see home care as something pleasant and not a battle between you and your cat.
- Sometimes it is easier to see somebody demonstrate dental home care on your cat. Most veterinary surgeries offer appointments with a veterinary nurse for this to be done, so if you're having problems then contact your veterinary surgery.

Alternative or supplementary home care techniques





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Some cats will not tolerate brushing no matter how much you persevere. In these cases, there are still ways in which you can help prevent plaque and tartar formation:

- If your cat is on soft food then changing to or adding dry food to your cat's diet may help to reduce plaque and tartar accumulation. However, ask your vet first to ensure a change of diet is suitable for your cat.
- Cat dental chews are usually available from your vet and perhaps also from a pet shop. They come in different flavours and can be helpful in reducing (but not preventing) plaque and tartar formation – ask your vet what the most effective dental chews are.
- If your cat likes the toothpaste you can try applying some toothpaste to dry food or dental chews to allow the toothpaste to rub against the teeth
- Chlorhexidine (an antiseptic that is useful in controlling bacteria in the mouth) mouthwashes or gels are available. These help reduce bacterial growth in the mouth, although prolonged use can discolour the tooth enamel.
- Your vet may also suggest a special 'dental diet' for your cat – some diets have been specially formulated to help control plaque and tartar, and these may be particularly helpful in cats with dental disease where home brushing is very difficult.

While it is likely that your cat will need dental treatment at some stage of their life, regular dental home care can dramatically improve oral health and reduce the necessity for dental procedures, which can be of benefit to you and your cat.