

Cheshire Grins!

Proper dental care is crucial to your cat's health. Learn how to care for your pet's teeth.

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Through experience, the Clarks find a finger brush makes it easier to navigate through cats' mouths. "It gives you more control," she says. They've switched to brushing the cats' teeth with grapefruit seed extract, which Steve Clark's dentist suggested he use on his own teeth. It's made a big difference for Cactus, Janis Clark says. "Her gums are less red, and there's less bleeding." Their veterinarian noticed the change at the cats' next visit.

"He told us, 'You're doing something that's made a change. Her teeth look much better,'" she says. Check with your veterinarian before trying any home remedies.

"It's my speculation that grapefruit seed extract is probably acidic and it might be erosive to the teeth," DuPont says. "I'd have to see a study before I'd recommend it."

As your cat ages, its dental needs change. If you start caring for its teeth when it's a kitten, problems should be minimal as it grows. Yearly veterinary checkups can help keep it healthy, but it may face special needs as it heads into its senior years. Older cats accumulate calculus and plaque faster, meaning they might need more frequent cleanings, DuPont says. Clean teeth might even help your cat live longer; bacteria on the teeth eventually finds its way to body organs. Older cats with poor oral health develop recessions and their teeth take on a longer appearance as they extrude from their sockets.

Young, healthy cats normally face minimal risk from anesthesia used during professional cleaning. "Anesthesia is safer than it's ever been. It's safer than driving [to the clinic]," DuPont says, noting some clients express a concern about anesthesia. Older cats may have other illnesses that increase the anesthesia risk. To determine unseen illness, your veterinarian may suggest running blood work to determine if your cat especially if it's older is healthy before putting it under anesthesia.

As more people become aware of the finer points of feline health, dental care will become more sophisticated, DuPont says. He looks forward to the day all veterinarians who practice dentistry have dental X-ray units in their hospitals. As owners become aware of their cat's oral health, it's likely more research will be done into the causes of conditions such as feline odontoclastic resorptive lesions, with an eye toward prevention and treatment.

New products are on the horizon. Researchers are looking into different dental care systems, such as placing a gel on the gum margin that will harden into a soft mass and release medications into the mouth to locally treat gingivitis.