

## Cheshire Grins!

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

*Kathy Swanwick*

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Emma, a 5-month-old American Shorthair, growled the first time she saw a toothbrush advancing toward her mouth. Her owner, Kathy Schwabenlender of Charlotte, N.C., calmed the kitten by cuddling her in her lap and stroking her fur. Holding the back of Emma's head, she slowly brought the flavored toothpaste-laden brush up to the kitten's teeth. Curious, Emma took a quick lick. "Once she tasted the toothpaste she was fine," Schwabenlender says. Still, Emma has to be sleepy to tolerate the procedure.

Schwabenlender, who's brushed her 3-year-old cat Mia's teeth since she was a kitten, hopes Emma will eventually learn to enjoy tooth brushing. "My veterinarian suggested it so they wouldn't have any dental problems," she says.

She tries to make the experience pleasant by holding Mia on her lap and letting her chew on the brush for a moment before lifting the cat's lips to brush her back teeth. Now, when Mia sees and smells the toothbrush slathered with flavored cat toothpaste she meanders over to sniff and lick it. "She knows it tastes good," Schwabenlender says.

Breeder Linda Gregory of Elizabethtown, Ky., owns Birmans and Maine Coons. To prevent gingivitis, an inflammation of the gums caused by tartar buildup, Gregory brushes all her cats' teeth with a toothbrush at least once weekly, starting when they're 4 weeks old. She stands them on the counter next to the kitchen sink, where she has set out water, flavored cat toothpaste and toothbrushes. It takes a few minutes to do each cat.

"Then they go on their way, licking indignantly. They tolerate it very well, even though it's not one of their favorite things to do," she says.

Some of her cats put up more of a fuss than others. "The studs are not so cooperative," Gregory says. She believes in the benefits of home oral care for her cats since none of them has needed a professional cleaning. She recommends it to people who buy her cats.

More than 70 percent of cats show signs of oral disease by the time they're 3 years old, according to the American Veterinary Dental Society. It is the most common problem in cats, says Gregg DuPont, DVM.