

Natural Approach to Cat's Dental Health

Help kitty get white teeth and fresh breath the natural way.

By Lisa Hanks

Brushing and a supportive, natural diet play huge roles in keeping your cat's teeth and gums healthy. "I advise frozen, raw meat diets," says Paula Terifaj, DVM, of Founders Veterinary Clinic in Brea, Calif., a holistic practitioner for 10 years.

Typically, without daily brushing, bacteria begin to grow on the teeth, usually near the gums. This turns into plaque, which begins to harden into brownish tartar (or calculus). According to Terifaj, carbohydrates offer the bacteria that normally live in the mouth a ready food supply, causing them to increase more quickly.

"If a cat's mouth doesn't smell like roses, there's a reason," says Jan Bellows, DVM, American Veterinary Dental College diplomate, of All Pets Dental Clinic in Weston, Fla., a board-certified veterinary dentist since 1988. "Bad breath is caused by bacteria that collects under the gum line because cats can't brush their own teeth. Plus, the semi-soft diet that many cats eat also collects under the gums."

Plaque and tartar throw off the balance of healthy bacteria in the mouth and inflame the gums, leading to tissue erosion and tooth decay. All this diseased matter circulates throughout the cat's system and causes other health problems, especially in the kidneys, liver, heart, brain and joints.

Signs of serious tooth trouble include bad breath, pawing at the mouth, swollen, red or bleeding gums, and broken, loose or brown-stained teeth.

To prevent this, Bellows advises brushing daily using toothpaste formulated for pets.

Many dental products also are available, including chews, wipes, drops and mouthwashes. The most effective are those that cause friction or abrasion on the teeth and have proven anti-plaque ingredients.

"Dental wipes are excellent," Bellows says. "Mouthwashes and water additives might help reduce plaque, but dental wipes work better because you're actually rubbing the teeth."

For a flossing effect, some holistic proponents advocate feeding soft, raw bones (chicken necks) or rare, tough chunks of meat (stew beef) twice weekly. However, raw or rare meat might contain dangerous pathogens, such as E. coli or salmonella, and some bones, particularly cooked ones, could splinter, causing intestinal damage. Use care when purchasing and feeding raw meat and bones. Safe alternatives include natural dental chews and fibrous treats.

Choose Natural Chews

Even though rawhides are generally sold for dogs, some cats chew on small rawhide chips, which provide a scrubbing action on their teeth. Gnawing an effective dental chew regularly can improve your cat's tooth and gum health. Natural chews should include high-quality (preferably human-grade) ingredients with no sugar, salt, chemicals or artificial colors, flavorings or preservatives. Also watch for extra fat or calories meant to add palatability — even in some rawhides.

Look for treats with abrasive or fibrous textures to scrape teeth and, ideally, ingredients to prevent plaque and tartar build-up.

For additional recommendations, check out the Veterinary Oral Health Council's website. "All listed products are considered safe and effective," says Jan Bellows, DVM. However, they aren't always natural, so if natural is what you want, you'll need to investigate ingredients.

Lisa Hanks is a freelance writer based in Newport Beach, Calif. As she writes each day, her three cats rotate lap duties to ensure she is never catless.