

Brush Up On Dental Care for a Difficult Cat

Tooth-brushing is an important contribution to your cat's dental health. Get expert tips on how to provide this benefit to a cat who would rather not partake.

Article and photos by Helen Jablonski

Whether young or old, regular tooth-brushing will benefit your cat's overall dental health. Although kittens will be more receptive to learning a daily brushing routine because of their openness to new things, even a difficult adult cat can be taught to accept tooth-brushing.

Resistance to tooth-brushing might be attributed to how a cat was raised and whether the mouth was handled when he was young, or if his history includes past dental problems, including painful teeth or gums. Finally, because of their personality, some cats just don't like their mouths to be touched.

The key to teaching a cat to accept tooth-brushing is to associate brushing with something positive, and for most cats the best enticement is food. Here are some tips on brushing a difficult cat's teeth:

Start with a pet toothbrush, finger brush or soft child's toothbrush.

Dip the toothbrush in your cat's favorite food — tuna juice, gravy from canned cat food, milk or even soft butter.

Want More Information on Cat Dental Health?
Check out these videos:

How to Brush a Cat's Teeth at Home
Get more expert advice on how to brush your cat's teeth.

A Healthy Cat's Mouth vs. An Unhealthy Cat's Mouth
See what danger signs you should look for in your cat's mouth.

Let your cat sniff, lick and chew
the toothbrush.

When your cat displays a positive reaction to the toothbrush, such as licking, give him a treat to reinforce that tooth-brushing is a pleasant experience. As your cat gets used to chewing on the toothbrush, slowly move it back and forth on the teeth. Get both sides of the mouth.

When your cat is comfortable with the toothbrush dipped in her favorite flavor, add a small dab of cat-approved toothpaste. Slowly increase the amount of cat toothpaste you use.

Never force your cat; be patient and let her advance at her own pace.

Afterward, always reward your cat with lots of praise, petting and a treat.

Do your training sessions before your cat's regular meal — she will be motivated by hunger.

Keep the training sessions short.

When brushing your cat's teeth, make sure to get both sides of his mouth. If your cat prefers treats to whatever is on the toothbrush, use them as an enticement. Let your cat smell the treat, but don't give it to him. Next, put the toothbrush by your cat's mouth. If he bites, licks or even sniffs the brush, give him one treat. Offer the toothbrush again, but don't give a treat until your cat pays attention to the toothbrush. Continue to alternate between the toothbrush and treats, but withhold the treat for longer periods of time. Cats are smart — your cat quickly will learn that he will get rewarded with a treat if he bites or chews on the toothbrush. Pet owners should strive to brush their cats' teeth, says R. Michael Peak, DVM, in Largo, Fla., and daily brushing is best.

In addition to brushing, you can feed your cat a dental diet and tartar control treats. "Anything that they'll chew to help prevent tartar formation or break up tartar that's on the teeth is a good idea," says Kenneth F. Lyon, DVM, in Gilbert, Ariz. Dental rinses that can be squirted in the mouth and water additives that your cat can drink are also available. These all help fight plaque and gum disease.

It might take your difficult cat weeks or months to accept tooth-brushing, but with patience and dedication to brushing every day, it can be done. You can make dental care a positive experience for both you and your cat.

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In February's CAT FANCY:
Get more expert advice on cat dental care and health.