



Mer Bleue Veterinary Hospital presents...

Routine Home Dental Care – Canine Edition



Dental care is an easily overlooked, but very important part of your furry friend's daily care plan. At Mer Bleue Veterinary Hospital, we want to make sure your animal companion's dental health is not forgotten!

Let's start by discussing the basics of dental disease!

As children, some of us were asked to brush our teeth at the dentist and then chew on a pink tablet that was provided. I don't know about you, but I remember feeling embarrassed when I smiled in front of the mirror and my mouth was full of pink spots! Those were all the areas of plaque that I didn't brush. Plaque is invisible to the naked eye, but it plays a big role in dental disease.

Plaque is a biofilm, a tightly bound collection of bacteria, sugar and protein. It can form within 24 hours, which is why it is recommended that we brush our teeth twice daily and our furry friend's teeth at least every other day. Within three days of forming, this plaque combines with saliva and forms **calculus** (the hard brown material you see on your furry friend's teeth).

Contrary to popular belief, the calculus, also known as tartar, you see on the teeth is not the main problem. The problem starts when plaque forms just under the gums. In this area, the bacteria secrete toxins and metabolic by-products which start to destroy surrounding gum tissue. This, along with the body's own attempt to kill the bacteria with the immune system, lead to inflammation.

Initially, the inflammation only affects the gums and leads to gingivitis (inflammation of the gums). Over time, the inflammation extends deeper along the tooth leading to periodontitis (inflammation of the periodontal tissues). The periodontal tissues include the periodontal ligament (the ligament holding the teeth to the jawbone), cementum (the outer edge of the tooth root) and the alveolar bone (the bone of the jaw). When the infection and inflammation spreads to the periodontal tissues, we call this **PERIODONTAL DISEASE**.

Periodontal disease can lead to pain for your furry friend.

When should a dental care plan be started?

Recent studies have reported that 90% of dogs and cats have some degree of periodontal disease by 1 year of age. This means that we need to start a dental care plan as soon as dogs get their full set of adult teeth, at 6 months of age.

Does starting a home dental care plan at 6 months prevent periodontal disease in the future?

The short answer is it depends on the dog. Some dogs, particularly small breed dogs, are genetically more prone to dental disease despite a regular dental health routine. For this reason, it is still important to have your furry friend's mouth assessed annually to detect issues early on. At these annual health exams, your Mer Bleue veterinarian may recommend a professional dental cleaning for your animal



companion. To learn about professional dental cleanings, see our handout on “The Ins and Outs of a Professional Dental Cleaning.”

What does an at home dental care plan entail?

Detailed below are options that can help reduce tartar and plaque build up overtime, helping to keep your animal companion’s breath smelling fresh and keeping their mouth pain free!

Not every option will work for every dog, which is why there are so many options!

Toothbrushing

Toothbrushing is always number one in our books. Your goal is to brush once daily. However, veterinary dentists say that the minimum frequency of brushing to make a difference in your animal companion’s oral health is every other day brushing.

Equipment You Will Need:

- Dog toothbrush
 - This can be a dog toothbrush, a human children’s toothbrush (as it is softer than the human adult toothbrush) or a dog finger brush.
- Dog toothpaste
 - It is important that you use dog toothpaste and **NOT human toothpaste**. Human toothpaste contains fluoride and sometimes xylitol, which are toxic to dogs.
 - We recommend the Virbac C.E.T. Enzymatic Toothpaste for dogs. Enzymatic means that the toothpaste contains enzymes that help break down the bacteria that form plaque and calculus. For the enzymes to work, mechanical action of brushing is required.

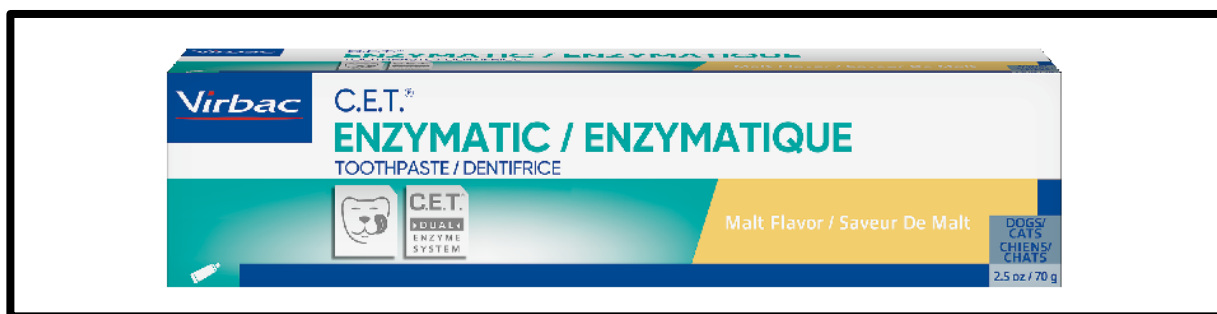


Figure 1 Photo Credit: <https://ca.virbac.com/products/dental/cet-enzymatic-toothpaste-dog-cat>

How to:

- Start by getting your animal companion accustomed to having his or her mouth handled. Open their mouth, lift their lips, and run your fingers along their teeth. To have the most success, it is best to start this at an early age.
- When they are used to having their mouth handled, then find a dog toothpaste they enjoy. There are many flavours of toothpastes. The Virbac C.E.T. enzymatic toothpaste comes in poultry, malt, vanilla-mint, beef and seafood.



- Start by feeding a small amount of this toothpaste on your finger to your furry friend. Try to do this at the same time and in the same location every day so it becomes a routine.
- Start slowly rubbing the toothpaste on the outside of the teeth with your finger.
- When they are used to this process, then introduce the toothbrush. Brush at a 45-degree angle to the teeth. You need to brush the outside of the teeth, but not the inside (the tongue does a good job controlling the plaque and tartar here). Brush the outside of ALL teeth (don't forget the molars at the very back of the mouth!).
 - It is important to note that, although you can use a puppy toothbrush before 6 months of age, you need to be very gentle brushing puppy teeth. Teething is a painful process and if you cause pain while toothbrushing, your animal companion may become aversive to the process.
- Brush teeth once daily, or at least every other day.

Dental Chews and Treats

There are countless dental chews and treats on the market for dogs. It can be difficult to determine which chews are good for your furry friend and which chews may harm your furry friend.

When it comes to chews and treats for dogs, the most important part is determining if the chew or treat (or toy!) is too hard for their teeth. Although enamel (the outer layer of the tooth) is very strong, it can still be broken. Broken teeth are a common finding in veterinary medicine; they can cause pain and infection.

Always follow the 'rule of knee' when it comes to chews, toys, and treats.



“If you wouldn't want someone hitting your knee with it, don't let your animal companion chew on it.”



Another good rule is if you can't bend the chew, toy, or treat, then it shouldn't be given to your furry friend.

So which chews and treats are good?

A good thing to look for on any dental-related product is the VOHC logo:



Figure 2: http://www.vohc.org/use_of_seal.htm

VOHC stands for Veterinary Oral Health Council. This council assesses the efficacy of dental products for dogs and cats. Companies voluntarily submit their products for evaluation. After scientific assessment, if the product is deemed to reduce tartar and plaque, the manufacturer may display the VOHC label on their product. For a full list of products with the VOHC label, please visit their website:

<http://www.vohc.org/>.

Here are a couple of the dental chews we recommend:



Figure 3: <https://ca.virbac.com/products/dental/cetenzymatic-oral-hygiene-chews>, <https://dental.virbac.com/us/cet-veggiedent-fresh>



Dental chews can be started at 6 months of age. There are puppy dental chews which can be given earlier.

Dental Diets

Dental diets are specifically formulated to help reduce plaque accumulation and tartar build up. The specific size and shape of the kibble, and the ingredients of the kibble help to make this happen. For a dental food to work, your animal companion must bite down into the kibble (they can't simply swallow it whole!). This explains why dental kibbles are typically larger than most pet store kibbles.

We recommend the following dental diets for dogs:

- Hill's T/D
- Royal Canin Dental
- Purina DH (Dental Health)

The above diets are veterinary prescription diets and are only available at veterinary hospitals. These diets come in different kibble sizes for different sized dogs.

It is worthwhile noting that if your furry friend is prone to weight loss, a dental diet is not for them. These diets tend to be higher in fat than other diets.

Dental diets can be started at 12 months of age.

Water Additives

Water additives are a last resort. They do not work as well as the above mentioned home dental care options as they do not provide any mechanical action, but they can provide some benefit. We recommend the following water additive:



Figure 4: https://www.healthymouth.com/dog_ESSENTIAL_Value_Jug_p/d008.htm

We hope this handout serves as a good starting point for a routine dental home care plan for your furry friend! If you have any questions, please feel free to email us at contact@merbleuevet.ca.