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## **DENTAL CARE FOR PUPPIES AND KITTENS**

The sooner you start caring for your pet's teeth, the longer they will live! It's true: periodontal disease is directly related to geriatric diseases such as liver, kidney, heart, and nervous system diseases. If you can keep your pet's mouth healthy they will live longer healthier lives.

The baby teeth of puppies and kittens erupt at 3 to 6 weeks of age. Adult teeth replace these by 6 months of age. Most people adopt pets between 6 and 12 weeks of age, so this is a perfect time to begin proper home dental care. When the adult teeth erupt, they should be brushed daily.

This is much easier if your pet is already used to having its mouth and teeth handled. Start within a day or two of bringing your new pet home. Pet the muzzle with your finger. Start at the side of the nose and rub your fingers along the muzzle and whisker. Then do the other side. Cats often do this naturally as part of their play with you. Do not let your pet bite your finger, even softly in play. Such behavior is not teeth brushing; it is early aggressive mouthing behavior. If s/he does, stop your "brushing" training and say "NO!" firmly, and resume the petting gently. This may be as far as you will get the first day or two. Be sure to only go as far as you can successfully.

Build each day on the previous day's success. You may only be able to put your hand on the muzzle the first day or two. This is fine, just remember to go slow and make it fun and part of the play you do with your pet. Use lots of praise and even a treat, if that helps. After your pet is used to the top muzzle (maxilla) being handled, start "petting" the bottom muzzle (mandible). Start in the front and rub your finger along each side. Get up close to the lips.

It is important to do this every day. Only then will it become a habit and part of your pet's daily life. It is actually easier to do it daily than every other day, or weekly, or monthly. By doing it daily, your pet looks forward to it and will train you to remember it. Some pets actually come running for the attention when they see the toothbrush.

Gradually, after 1-2 weeks, you will be able to "pet" the gums with your finger or a soft bristled toothbrush. This should only take 30 seconds. Try to put your finger along the gums to the last molars (below the eye). By 6 months of age, your pet will be so used to having its mouth, teeth and gums handled, brushing those new white adult teeth will be easy.