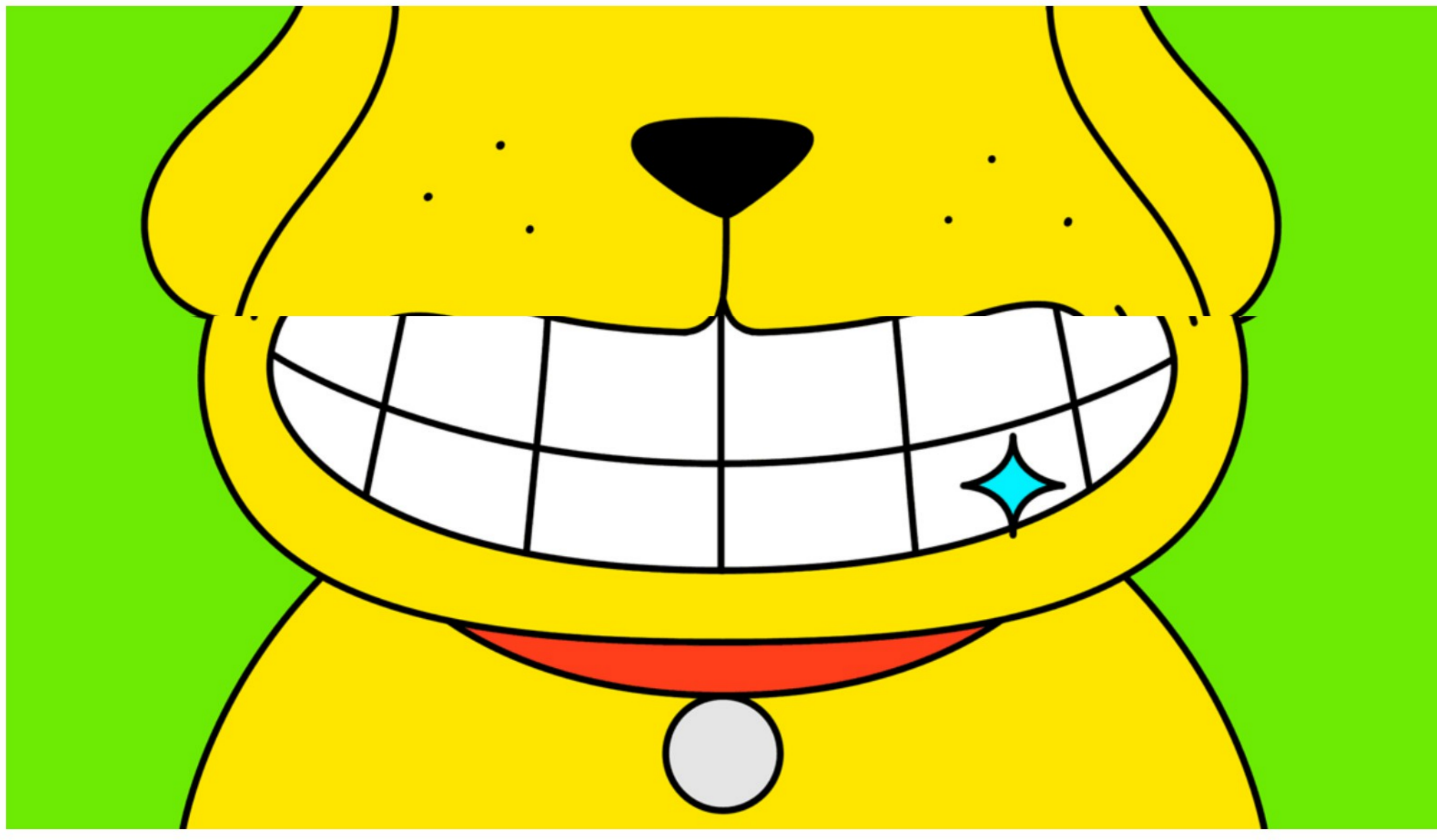


FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

# Pet Dental Care: How to Keep Your Fur Baby's Chompers Clean and Why You Need to

Veterinarians say oral health is just as important for dogs and cats as it is for their humans

By Matt Alderton, AARP  
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VINCENT KILBRIDE



Even the most adorable dogs have been known to ingest some pretty atrocious things. From dead animals to garbage and used tissues — to say nothing of their own vomit — what dogs like to eat can be downright disgusting.

Believe it or not, however, the worst thing happening in your dog's mouth might not be dumpster debris or rabbit poop. It could be dental plaque.



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"Pets ... build tartar on their teeth just like people," says veterinarian Curt Coffman, national director of dentistry for Thrive Pet Healthcare, a nationwide network of veterinary hospitals and clinics. "Dirty teeth lead to periodontal disease and ultimately infections and tooth loss, if untreated."

Periodontal disease is one of the most common diseases among pets. By age 3, most dogs and cats have it to at least some degree, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

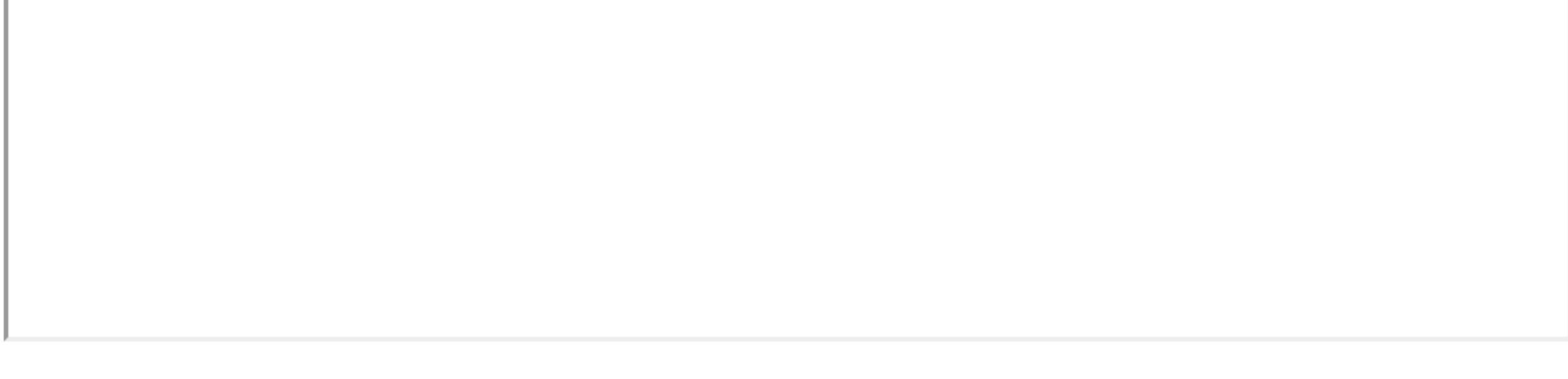
Here's what you need to know to [care for](#) your pet's chompers.

### How can you tell if your dog has periodontal disease?

Early signs and symptoms include bad breath; loose, broken or discolored teeth; abnormal eating behavior; and red, swollen or bleeding gums.

### What causes periodontal disease in pets?

An accumulation of plaque on the teeth triggers a condition that causes gum inflammation in the form of gingivitis, says Naomi Hoyer, assistant professor of veterinary dentistry at Colorado State University. "If left untreated, this can progress to bone loss around the teeth," Hoyer says.

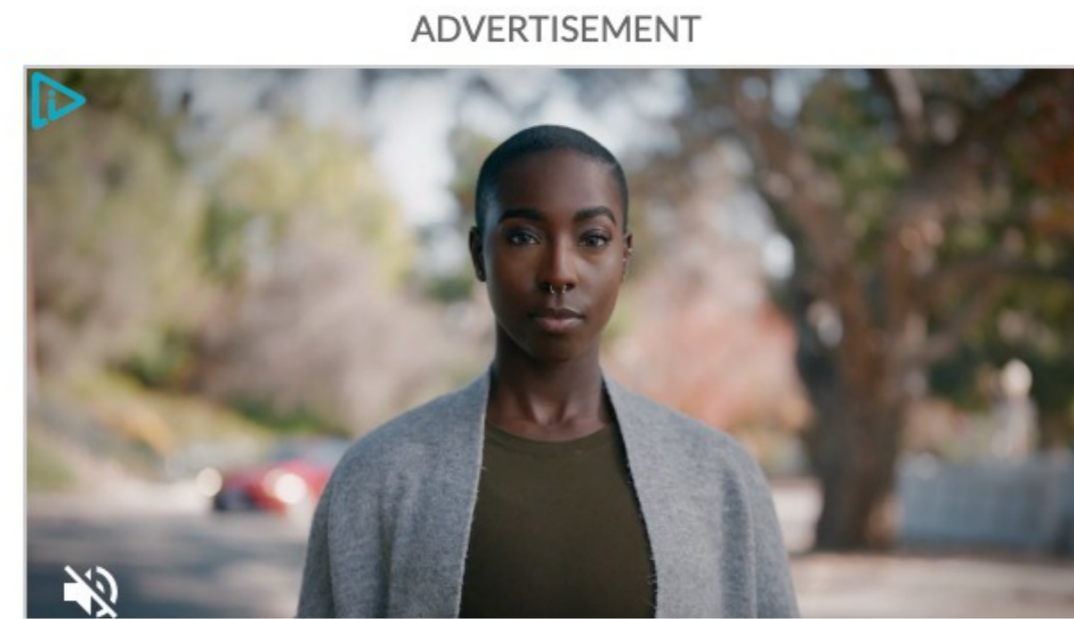


### How bad is it?

Even if the damage is contained to the mouth, dental disease can be devastating. It can cause severe pain, lead to [nutritional deficits](#) from eating difficulties and might ultimately require expensive and life-altering tooth extractions.

"Pets rely on their mouths for a variety of needs beyond eating, such as protection, communication and affection, so it's important to maintain dental care throughout your pet's life," says Whitney Miller, chief veterinarian at national pet retailer Petco.

It may not be just the mouth that suffers, says Teresa Manucy, a veterinarian for online pet food and pet-related products retailer Chewy. Systemic inflammation from gingivitis in a pet's mouth can wreak havoc on vital organs. "Dogs may experience heart disease, pancreatitis and an increased risk of cancer," she says. "Cats may experience kidney disease, diabetes and systemic infections."



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### Are certain breeds more at risk?

Small dogs are more likely to develop dental problems more quickly and at a younger age, Coffman says. "Their compact mouths, heads and faces, along with other genetic features, predispose them to rapid tartar buildup, plaque and gingivitis more than larger dogs," he explains. [Other breeds](#) at risk are those with flat faces such as Boston terriers or pugs, he says. Their teeth are often crowded or misaligned due to their head structure, leading to a greater chance of developing the disease. "As they get older, they lose jawbone density, often requiring extractions at a younger age compared to larger dogs."

The same can be true among cats. "Persian and exotic cat breeds with flat faces ... have similar dental issues, which result from crowded and malpositioned teeth," Manucy says.



HEALTH & WELLNESS

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### The good news: Dental disease is preventable

As is the case for humans, good oral hygiene can keep periodontal disease at bay. Here are six things you can do to improve your pet's teeth — and in the process, their overall [health and well-being](#).



Video: Getting the Best, Most Affordable Care for Your Pet

### Brush their teeth daily

In humans, good oral health starts with routine toothbrushing. The same is true in pets, according to Hoyer. "Just like in people, brushing removes plaque, which is a bacterial biofilm, and reduces gum inflammation," she says. "Ideally, brushing takes place once a day."

If every day sounds like a slog, you need to brush their teeth at least three times a week to make a difference in plaque and tartar buildup, according to the VCA Animal Hospitals [website](#).

### Use a pet toothbrush

Be sure to use a pet-specific toothbrush that's soft-bristled and angled to reach the tooth surface, as well as pet-specific toothpaste, Manucy advises. "Finger brushes and dental wipes are a great training tool to get the pet used to brushing but are not as effective at removing plaque from the tooth surface as angled-handle brushes," she says. "It is also helpful to use a toothpaste that is flavored for pets and does not contain fluoride for safer swallowing."

### Introduce toothbrushing slowly

"Your pet may need time to get used to having their teeth brushed, so it's best to start slowly by letting them sniff the brush and toothpaste before attempting to clean their teeth," Miller says. "When brushing your pet's teeth, be sure you are gentle with the toothbrush and avoid scrubbing too forcefully against their gums. Finally, remember to reward your pet with treats before and after brushing, so they create a positive association with the routine."

Pets who get used to toothbrushing might learn to tolerate more advanced oral health tools. "I know dogs that have their own water flossers and sonic toothbrushes, so if you start early, go slow and keep it positive, dogs can get used to a lot," Hoyer says.

If brushing at home isn't working out, your pet groomer might have the magic touch: Many offer toothbrushing services for a small fee.



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### Try chewable treats and toys

If your pet won't tolerate toothbrushing, try dental chew treats or toys to reduce the buildup of plaque before it turns to tartar, Manucy says.

Treats are an especially good way for cat owners to remove plaque since cats often aren't amenable to toothbrushing, Hoyer says.

Choose treats and toys wisely, as some might hurt more than help, Hoyer says. "Be careful about using treats that are too hard," she says. "I use the rule of thumb: If I can't indent it with my thumbnail, then it's not safe. Tooth fracture is a very common problem in dogs, often because they are chewing things that are too hard."

Keep in mind that even the best chews are no substitute for brushing. "Toothbrushing really is the most ideal because it can get to all the teeth, even the front ones," Hoyer says. "Dogs and cats almost exclusively chew with their back teeth. So those big, important front teeth — the canines — are going to need brushing to stay healthy."

### Wet their whistle with water additives

"Gels and water additives can be helpful in breaking up bacterial biofilm, but products that serve to physically remove plaque are always going to be better," Hoyer says.

Whatever your oral health aid of choice, look for products that are certified by the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC). "Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of oversight with how animal products get marketed to the general public," Hoyer says. "Companies can make lots of claims about products that are very challenging to substantiate," she continues. "Similar to the ADA (American Dental Association) for human products, the VOHC reviews studies and compiles a list of products that have actually been shown to effectively reduce plaque on dog and cat teeth."

### Pony up for a professional cleaning

If your pet has signs of dental disease, there's only one solution: a professional cleaning, Manucy says. "A dental cleaning under anesthesia is needed to ensure safe removal above and under the gum line," she says.

Although the use of anesthesia can make dental cleanings expensive — from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, depending on where you live, the procedures performed and whether the veterinarian is a general practitioner or a dental specialist — it's necessary, according to Hoyer, not only to ensure a thorough cleaning but also to avoid scaring and traumatizing your pet.

The best way to avoid expensive cleanings and surgeries, Hoyer concludes, is to embrace prevention early.

*Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.*

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