

# Tooth or Dare

## Ways to maintain your canine's canines

BY LESLIE CRANE RUGG AND EVA SAKS

Oral infections and tooth abscesses can lead to life-shortening complications. Fortunately, options for preventive care abound. Each has risks and benefits.

### Veterinary "Dentals"

If dogs eat kibble or canned food, they need annual in-office dentals. Vets should perform a pre-op exam with blood work, and should administer antibiotics.

**PRO:** Dentals provide deep cleaning with specialized equipment. Some vets use a scaling and sealing system that prevents many problems, including periodontal disease.

**CON:** Besides the cost, dentals require general anesthesia. A brief procedure can be done using only a short-acting drug, but most dentals require gas anesthesia with an induction agent. Ask your vet what is appropriate, given your dog's health, age, breed, and medical history. Ask about side effects.

### Brush Those Teeth

"The best thing you can do for your dog's teeth is brush them every day," says Renee Gross, DVM, of the Animal Medical Center of Southern California.

**PRO:** Accessible and inexpensive. Look for the enzyme glucose oxidase in toothpaste to break down sugars that adhere to teeth.

**CON:** Daily brushing is quite

a commitment. Some dogs resist it, but the outcome is worth the effort. Scrutinize toothpaste ingredients to avoid dangerous chemicals as well as allergens. Xylitol, for example, causes low blood sugar and can compromise liver functions.

### Anesthesia-Free Teeth Cleaning

Not all dogs tolerate the discomfort of anesthesia-free teeth cleaning, but those who do have sparkling smiles. Commence antibiotics before the procedure if your dog is at high risk for infection.

**PRO:** Many practitioners come to your house. Scaling provides valuable maintenance by loosening plaque.

**CON:** In some states, practitioners are not certified or licensed. Homes don't provide a sterile environment, so infections can result. Dogs may ingest removed particles, precipitating inhalation pneumonia and other serious diseases.



### Raw Turkey and Chicken Necks

Diet impacts teeth. Edible raw bones, properly selected and chewed, improve dental health.

**PRO:** Nicknamed "nature's toothbrush," raw bones clean teeth, provide mental and physical stimulation, and contain important minerals. Nancy Scanlan, DVM, president of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association, says, "The safest raw bone for a large dog is a turkey neck and for small dogs a chicken neck." The connective tissues act as "nature's floss."

**CON:** Always supervise when feeding raw bones. Never give cooked bones, which may pierce the intestine. Even raw bones can cause internal perforations or obstructions if not thoroughly chewed.

### Chews, Cleansers, Gels, and Additives

**Dental chews** vary in effectiveness. Traditional products contain chlorhexidine, which effectively kills bacteria in the biofilm coating teeth. Alternative products use natural enzymes, which break up the biofilm.

**PRO:** Portability, exercise.

**CON:** Some dogs don't like the taste.

Chlorhexidine has side effects, including staining. Many enzyme claims are unproven. Rawhide chews raise concerns about obstructions, country

of origin, allergies, protein level, and formaldehyde inclusion. Vegetable and vegetable oil-based chews may cause diarrhea. A new "veggie rawhide" has been associated with renal failure.

**Oral cleansers** are squirted into dogs' mouths. Like chews, they can contain chlorhexidine or enzymes.

**PRO:** Freshen breath.

**CON:** Many do not work. Most include artificial dyes. Some stain. Some have side effects.

**Oral gels** are spread onto dogs' gums to make them salivate, causing the gel to cover teeth and gums.

**PRO:** Suitable for dogs with missing teeth.

**CON:** Even the new generation of gels may contain artificial dyes.

**Water additives** are concentrated cleansers that you dilute and add to your dog's water.

**PRO:** Easy to administer.

**CON:** Beware of xylitol.

### Dental Treats

These tasty snacks are marketed as being dentally beneficial.

**PRO:** Palatability.

**CON:** "Dental treat" is an oxymoron. Unless coated with calculus-inhibiting SHMP (see AKC GAZETTE August 2009 "Healthy Dog"), a sugary biscuit "just coats the teeth with a food source for bacteria," says Gross—even biscuits without sweeteners, as carbohydrates turn into simple sugars. ♦

*Leslie Crane Rugg and Eva Saks collaborate on print and media projects related to dogs and culture.*