Training Your Dog to Accept Teeth Brushing

Some general concepts:

Your goal: To brush your dog’s teeth once daily with small circular motions along the gum line of the outside edge of all top and bottom teeth.

Be patient. It is human nature to want to get all this done in the first sitting, but that is not possible. Training to accept tooth brushing should be done with little or no restraint. At the first sign of your dog pulling away, you are moving too fast. How long it takes for your dog to accept tooth brushing will vary with his or her temperament, as well as yours. Most dogs will take between 1 week and 2 months to accept tooth brushing.

Tooth brushing can (and must) be a pleasant experience for both of you. You brush your own teeth. You know there is nothing inherently unpleasant about tooth brushing. It is pleasant for your dog because he gets attention and treats from the love of his life. It is pleasant for you because your dog loves it and you derive immense satisfaction from seeing those pearly whites and pink healthy gums, and having that doggie breath odor free. It is also pleasant for you because you know you are improving the health and comfort of your loved pet.

Tooth brushing is a responsibility all pet owners should accept as part of routine health care. Tooth brushing doesn’t take too much time, and it’s not that much work. Don’t succumb to those excuses. You feed and walk your dog every day don’t you? Tooth brushing is less work than that. A quick tooth brushing can take 10 seconds. You have that much to spare don’t you? Even a very thorough tooth brushing takes less than 2 minutes.

Once the training phase is complete, once daily tooth brushing is sufficient. During the training phase, 3 or 4 sessions per day is appropriate.

Equipment needed:

*CET toothpaste for dogs and cats. Human toothpaste cannot be used because it contains too much fluoride and detergent to be swallowed daily.
*A treat your dog would do just anything to have—treat choice is important. Ideally it should be very small so you can give 10 to 15 of them without filling your dog up. If the only treats your dog likes are bigger or “junk-food” you will have to decrease the amount of kibble she gets to avoid weight gain during the training period.
*A CET finger brush
*Various sizes and shapes of toothbrushes to experiment with (CET mini brush, human pediatric toothbrush, large
1. You will be learning to brush the upper teeth on your dog's left side (your right with her facing you) before progressing to the rest of the mouth. (If you are left handed, you can reverse these instructions). Your dog must be trained to sit in front of you and be still for 10 to 15 seconds while you are holding a treat in front of her. During each phase of training, if your dog pulls back or looks concerned stop the exercise immediately. Have her do some other commands to earn treats, or play with her for a minute and go back to the tooth brushing exercise later.

2. Gather several tiny pieces of the yummy treat. Have your dog sit in front of you. If your have a very small dog, you may find it easier to have her sit in someone else’s lap, facing you. This makes her feel more secure and keeps her from easily backing away. Use your right hand to give treats. Give her a treat. Kneel down in front of her. Give her a treat. Take your left hand and place it sideways over the top of her muzzle with the tips of your fingers curving over the left side of her muzzle. Give her a treat. Gently raise her left upper lip (on your right side) with the fingertips of your left hand, and rub the upper left canine tooth with your right hand. Give her a treat. You are done. Get the idea? Use lots and lots and lots of yummy treats and your dog will flip out every time you grab that toothbrush. You can also begin toothbrush acclimation at this time by letting your dog lick some toothpaste off of the brush…but don’t try to put it in her mouth yet!!

3. The next step is to rub more upper teeth with your right hand each time. Give treats every few seconds. Progress each day until you are rubbing your finger across all the upper right teeth. You will notice that even though you are gently lifting the lip up with your left hand, you may not be able to see the back teeth very well. That is OK. Just feel your way when brushing them. Trying to fully expose all the teeth visually is difficult and not necessary. Once your dog is comfortable with all her right upper teeth being rubbed, proceed to the next step. This might take a few hours or a few weeks.

4. Add toothpaste to your finger and repeat the tooth/gum massage. Most dogs will be trying to lick the toothpaste off of your finger. That is OK, but try to keep the treats coming fast enough that she is waiting for the treat and focusing on that instead of the toothpaste. If the toothpaste tastes too good and is a distraction, there are non flavored ones available. Once your dog accepts you rubbing toothpaste all along the gum line of the right upper teeth, with out any fear or apprehension, move to the next step.

5. Now it is time to add the brush. Depending on the size of your dog, you may decide to use a finger brush, a pediatric toothbrush, or a normal adult sized tooth brush. It is easier to get the smaller toothbrushes in the mouths of the smaller dogs, but with the larger brushes more teeth get brushed at once, making the procedure easier. Moisten the brush and add some toothpaste. Place your left hand over the top of the muzzle and lift the upper left lip up as previously described. Holding the toothbrush in your right hand, brush the upper left canine.
Give your dog a treat. You are done. Don’t try to brush the whole mouth at once!!! This will be scary, and could cause the dog to associate tooth brushing with unpleasant things.

6. Brush a few more teeth with each training period until you are brushing all the upper right teeth. You will notice that you can use the handle of the toothbrush to push the lips out of the way as you brush towards the back. If you are using a finger brush, your finger will be pushing the lips out. Again, you don’t have to be able to see what you are doing if you can feel that you are brushing the teeth in the back.

7. Now it is time to proceed to the lower teeth. We have saved these for last because they are more difficult to get to, and your dog needs to be comfortable with the whole process before the lower teeth are attempted. You have noticed by now that the lower teeth are covered by the upper teeth when the mouth is closed. If your dogs mouth is closed it is difficult to brush the crowns of the lower back teeth, but you are aiming at the gum line anyway, not the crown. The mouth only has to be open a fraction to brush the gum line. Usually your dog will be licking at the toothpaste so the mouth will be open enough to brush the gum line of the lower teeth. You can also use gentle pressure with the brush handle or back of the brush to open the mouth a bit, our you can open the mouth a bit with your left hand coming over the top of the muzzle. Some dogs’ lips are very tightly held to the bottom jaw towards the front of their mouth, which can make brushing the lower canine teeth difficult. Use the brush to push the lips down as you are brushing the gum line.

8. Now do the same procedure with both sides of the mouth. Always use treats. Once your dog is used to tooth brushing, one treat before, one during, and one after should be sufficient.