



Dog Tartar Removal: How to Clean Your Dog's Teeth



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Not so long ago, people didn't know they needed to pay attention to their dogs' teeth. Dog tartar removal was mostly unheard of. When veterinarians first started recommending dental cleanings for their patients, they met a lot of resistance. Dog parents had no idea that dogs' teeth are made just like ours and can develop all the same problems if they're not cared for.

Fortunately, veterinarians and most dog parents now know how critical [dental care](#) is. As in humans, plaque can build up on a dog's teeth, followed by tartar accumulation if not cleaned, which can lead to all sorts of problems, including periodontal disease with tooth loss, heart disease, kidney disease, and many other internal organ conditions. Let's look at how this happens and how to prevent it.

Main takeaways

- When plaque combines with the minerals in saliva, it becomes tartar.
- Plaque can be brushed off, but tartar cannot.
- Tartar leads to pain, problems eating, tooth loss, periodontal disease, and internal organ dysfunction.
- There are many causes of tartar, including lack of brushing, age, insufficient chewing, and a lack of professional cleanings.
- You can try home removal of tartar, but it's unlikely to remove it all.
- A professional cleaning is necessary for all dogs to remove all tartar.

What is tartar, and why is it a problem?

Tartar occurs on a dog's teeth when plaque (a sticky film of bacteria) combines with saliva and turns into a hard, yellow, or brown substance. This occurs because there are minerals in a dog's saliva that, when combined with plaque, become tartar. If you don't practice good dental hygiene on your dog, plaque accumulates and, over time, becomes tartar.

The reason tartar is a problem is that it causes several uncomfortable and potentially dangerous conditions, including

- **Gingivitis:** Red, swollen gums which can lead to periodontal disease
- **Bad breath:** Tartar contains bacteria that produce foul-smelling compounds.
- **Pain and discomfort:** As tartar builds up, it can cause gum recession, which causes the roots of the teeth to be exposed.
- **Problems eating:** Inflamed gums, gum recession, and exposed roots can cause pain.
- **Risk of infection:** Tartar getting below the gumline causes bacterial spread, which can lead to abscesses or infections in the mouth.

Infection in the mouth can also spread bacteria to important organs in the body, including the heart, kidneys, and liver.

Causes of tartar accumulation

There are multiple causes of a buildup of tartar in your dog's mouth.

- **[Infrequent brushing](#):** leads to a buildup of plaque, which transforms into tartar within 24 to 72 hours
- **Not enough chewing:** toys or bones can help scrape plaque off
- **Soft food:** doesn't require chewing
- **High carbohydrate diets:** encourage bacteria
- **More minerals in saliva:** help form tartar
- **Genetics:** overcrowded or misaligned teeth, softer enamel, prone to periodontal disease
- **Age:** older dogs have more plaque, which leads to increased tartar
- **Medications or health conditions:** leading to dry mouth
- **Medical conditions:** diabetes, immune system disorders
- **Neglecting professional dental care:** accumulation of tartar over time

How to remove your dog's tartar at home

Removing your dog's tartar at home is difficult and not completely effective, especially if the tartar is thick and hardened. However, plaque (which leads to tartar) can often be managed at home through regular oral care.

Brushing your dog's teeth

Other than having a professional cleaning by your vet, brushing your dog's teeth is the best

thing you can do to prevent tartar. Just be sure to use a dog-specific toothbrush or finger brush and toothpaste formulated especially for dogs. Human toothpaste has too much fluoride and may contain xylitol, which is toxic to dogs. Gently lift your dog's lips to expose the teeth and brush in circular motions. Focus on the gum lines. Daily brushing is ideal, but even two to three times per week can be helpful.

The best dental sprays and gels for tartar

[Sprays and gels](#) to control tartar can be very helpful, especially with tooth brushing. Ensure the gel or spray you choose is made especially for dogs and not for people. Also, look for the [Veterinary Oral Health Council](#) (VOHC) seal of approval.

There are a variety of ingredients that can be helpful:

- Enzymes: Glucose oxidase and lactoperoxidase target harmful bacteria in the mouth.
- Natural antimicrobials: Neem oil is known for its antibacterial properties. Grapefruit seed extract also fights bacteria.
- Soothing agents: Aloe vera soothes irritated gums.
- Mild abrasives: Baking soda has long been known to clean teeth gently and neutralize acids in the mouth.
- Essential oils: Peppermint and spearmint oils can help freshen breath and may help fight bacteria. Speak to your vet before using essential oils.
- Herbal extracts: Thyme leaf oil contains natural antiseptic properties that can aid in reducing oral bacteria.
- Chlorhexidine gluconate: This potent antiseptic is commonly used in veterinary dental products and is effective against a wide range of oral bacteria.

The best natural remedies to try for tartar

In addition to the natural ingredients included in the previous section, here are some additional things you can try:

- Brushing (always at the top of every list) with baking soda
- Coconut oil: apply to your finger or a brush to rub onto your dog's teeth and gums.
- Apple cider vinegar (diluted): Add a teaspoon of apple cider vinegar (one part vinegar to 10 parts water) to your dog's water bowl or apply directly to the teeth with a cotton ball.
- Carrots and other crunchy vegetables
- Parsley and mint: Mixing fresh parsley or mint leaves into your dog's food can help freshen their breath and reduce bacteria.
- Water additives: You can try aloe vera or enzymes.
- Dog-specific probiotics: to balance bacteria in your dog's mouth
- Dental chews, dental chew toys, and treats made with all-natural ingredients

If the tartar buildup is mild, these suggestions may help. They can also be more effective if your dog has just had a professional cleaning and you're starting with clean teeth.

When to consult a vet or dog dental provider

You can make great strides in caring for your dog's dental needs at home. However, there comes a time for all dogs when it's time to get a professional involved. It's no different for humans; even if we brush our teeth several times a day, we still have to go to the dentist on a regular basis to prevent periodontal disease.

Here are the most common signs that your dog may need a professional dental cleaning:

- Persistent bad breath
- Visible tartar buildup
- Red, swollen, or bleeding gums
- Drooling or difficulty eating
- Loose, broken, or missing teeth
- Pawing at the mouth or face
- Swelling in the face or jaw
- Persistent dropping of toys or food
- Stained or discolored teeth
- Gum recession or exposed roots
- Irritable, lethargic, or resistant to having the mouth touched
- Pus or discharge from the gums, obvious abscesses, or a foul odor

If you see your dog having any of the above signs, it's time to have a vet visit.

Professional dog cleaning for tartar

A professional dog teeth cleaning is performed by a veterinarian with assistance from veterinary nurses to remove tartar, treat gum disease, and improve oral health. Perhaps your dog has had a cleaning before or needs to have one, but you don't know what goes on in the dental suite. Here are the steps:

1. Your pup will be given a thorough exam by your veterinarian, including blood tests, to ensure there are no reasons not to have anesthesia. General anesthesia is necessary for all dogs to keep your dog still and comfortable. Proper cleaning requires getting under the gum line, which could be uncomfortable for an awake dog. It's also noisy.
2. The tartar is removed using an ultrasonic scaler and some hand scaling, similar to your own dentist's procedure. After the scaling, teeth are polished to leave a smooth surface that will help prevent plaque and tartar from adhering in the future.
3. After the polishing, some vets apply fluoride or a sealant. This can strengthen the enamel and help prevent plaque buildup. If periodontal disease or any other abnormality is suspected, it's time for X-rays so your vet can see the roots and jawbone. Any additional treatments, such as a tooth extraction, are done at this time.
4. Depending on the outcome of the cleaning and exam, your vet may or may not prescribe antibiotics or pain medication. You will also receive home care advice. Your dog usually goes home the same day and should be quite comfortable unless multiple extractions were performed, in which case pain medications will help keep your pup from being in pain.

How to prevent tartar buildup in your dog

Just as with humans, after your dog's professional cleaning, plaque will once again start to accumulate. To help prevent that, the best thing you can do is brush your dog's teeth daily. If your pup won't let you do that, try the many tips we have given you in this article. You can try water additives, dental sprays and gels, chew toys, dental treats, dental diets, and crunchy vegetables.

Regardless of whether you can brush your dog's teeth or use the products mentioned, your dog must return to the vet for routine exams. Your vet will keep track of the condition of the teeth and let you know when another cleaning is needed. Some dogs can go for years before another cleaning, while others need one yearly. It's essential to listen to your vet's recommendations so your dog's mouth and the rest of the body stay healthy for as long as possible.

FAQs

Are certain breeds more prone to tartar?

Certain dog breeds are more prone to tartar buildup due to a combination of genetic and physical factors, including:

- Small breeds such as Chihuahuas, Yorkshire Terriers, Shih Tzus, and Pomeranians tend to have more dental issues due to their smaller mouths and overcrowded teeth.
- Brachycephalic breeds such as Bulldogs, Pugs, and Boxers often have compressed jaws and irregular teeth alignment.
- Toy breeds such as Maltese, Poodles, and Cavalier King Charles Spaniels are also prone to dental problems due to their large teeth and small jaws.
- Large breeds with heavy jowls such as Newfoundlands, Saint Bernards, and Great Danes can sometimes retain saliva and food debris in their large, droopy mouths.

What softens tartar?

Only a professional cleaning will remove all the tartar on your dog's teeth, but the following products may soften it:

- Dental water additives
- Dental gels
- Raw bones or chews
- Brushing with enzymatic toothpaste
- Dental diets
- Coconut oil or baking soda

Softening tartar may delay the further progression of tartar buildup, make chewing or brushing possible to remove some tartar, and make your dog's mouth feel more comfortable. However, nothing but a professional cleaning will remove all the tartar from the teeth.

Does enzymatic toothpaste remove tartar for dogs?

Enzymatic toothpaste cannot remove tartar, but it may soften it.

Can you scale a dog's teeth at home?

Scaling your dog's teeth at home is not a good idea. If you attempt to scale your dog's teeth at home, the following problems can occur:

- You can easily injure your dog's gums, teeth, and tongue. Also, over-scraping can damage the enamel.
- The cleaning will be incomplete because the tartar below the gumline cannot be removed without proper tools and anesthesia. This will lead to infections, periodontal disease, and tooth loss.
- Attempting to scale your dog's teeth at home can be highly stressful for your pet, potentially causing anxiety about future dental care.

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