



Cat Won't Tolerate Toothbrushing? Here's What Dr. Tom Recommends Instead



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Expert veterinary advice on maintaining feline dental health when brushing isn't an option

Any cat owner who has tried to brush their feline's teeth knows the struggle is real. During a recent Reddit Ask Me Anything session hosted by GREENIES™, veterinarian Dr. Thomas Hamilton (Dr. Tom), DVM, addressed one of the most common concerns among cat owners: what to do when your cat absolutely refuses to cooperate with toothbrushing.

Understanding the Challenge

First, Dr. Tom offers validation for frustrated cat parents everywhere: "Some cats just absolutely will not tolerate a toothbrush, and that's OK." This acknowledgment is important because many cat owners feel guilty about their inability to brush their cat's teeth, when in reality, feline cooperation is often the limiting factor rather than owner dedication.

While toothbrushing remains one of the most effective at-home methods for plaque control..., Dr. Tom emphasizes that there are effective alternatives for cats that won't tolerate it. The key is finding consistent daily habits that help reduce plaque and tartar

accumulation while supporting gum health.

Dental Wipes: A Less Invasive First Alternative

For cats that resist traditional brushing, dental wipes often provide a more acceptable compromise. "Many cats do tolerate wipes better because they're less invasive than a brush," Dr. Tom explained. The reduced intrusion makes them more manageable for both cats and their owners.

It's important to set realistic expectations, however. "They don't remove plaque as thoroughly as brushing, but they do provide some mechanical cleaning and may help reduce surface bacteria and plaque accumulation on the tooth surface when used regularly," Dr. Tom noted. While not as effective as brushing, dental wipes still offer meaningful benefits for maintaining oral health between professional cleanings.

The mechanical action of wiping helps remove surface bacteria and soft plaque before it hardens into tartar. For cats that will tolerate this approach, regular use can make a noticeable difference in oral hygiene.

Enzymatic Products: Working Chemistry in Your Favor

Beyond physical cleaning methods, Dr. Tom recommends considering enzymatic dental products specifically formulated for cats. These include dental rinses and gels that contain enzymes designed to support oral health.

"These can be applied to the gums and teeth daily and may help slow the formation of plaque," Dr. Tom explained. These products can support home dental care but should not be viewed as a substitute for professional dental evaluation and treatment when dental disease is present. The advantage of enzymatic products is that they work on a chemical level, even in areas that are difficult to reach mechanically. While they don't replace the mechanical removal of plaque, they can complement other dental care efforts and provide an additional layer of protection against bacterial buildup.

These products are particularly useful for cats that barely tolerate any oral manipulation, as they can often be applied more quickly and with less struggle than wipes or brushing.

Dental Treats: Prevention Your Cat Will Actually Enjoy

One of the most practical tools in feline dental care is also the easiest to implement: dental treats. "You can also pair these habits with daily dental treats made for cats, like appropriately sized FELINE GREENIES™ Dental Treats, which help mechanically reduce tartar accumulation as part of a routine your cat actually enjoys," Dr. Tom said.

The beauty of dental treats is that they turn dental care into a positive experience rather than a battle. The mechanical action of chewing may help reduce plaque and tartar accumulation on tooth surfaces during regular use, particularly on the teeth cats use most while chewing. Unlike brushing or wipes, most cats willingly participate in this form of dental care—making it one of the most sustainable daily habits you can establish.

For multi-cat households or cats with varying dental care needs, dental treats offer a consistent baseline of care that works for nearly every cat.

The Critical Factor: Consistency Over Perfection

Throughout his response, Dr. Tom returned to one essential principle: consistency matters more than the specific method chosen. "The most important thing is consistency," he emphasized. "Even if brushing isn't possible, a daily habit of dental wipes, rinses, and treats can help reduce plaque and/or tartar accumulation that can lead to dental disease."

This message is particularly important for cat owners who may feel overwhelmed by ideal dental care recommendations. Rather than attempting to force an uncooperative cat to tolerate brushing—potentially creating stress and negative associations—Dr. Tom advocates for building sustainable habits using methods your cat will accept.

The goal is to interrupt the progression from plaque to tartar to periodontal disease through regular intervention, even if that intervention isn't the textbook ideal. A consistent home dental care routine is generally more beneficial than infrequent or inconsistent dental care efforts that create stress for both cat and owner.

Don't Skip the Professional Check-Ups

Regardless of your home dental care routine, Dr. Tom stresses one non-negotiable element: "Regular veterinary dental exams are crucial, so your veterinarian can monitor the health of your cat's teeth and gums and recommend a professional cleaning when needed."

Home care, no matter how diligent, cannot catch everything. A significant portion of periodontal disease occurs below the gum line and may not be visible during home evaluation. Only a veterinary professional can assess the full extent of your cat's oral health and determine when professional intervention is necessary.

These exams allow your veterinarian to identify problems early, before they progress to painful infections or tooth loss. They can also help you gauge whether your home care routine is effectively maintaining your cat's oral health or whether adjustments are needed.

Building Your Cat's Dental Care Plan

Based on Dr. Tom's guidance, an effective dental care plan for cats that won't tolerate brushing might include:

Daily Habits:

- Dental wipes (if tolerated) to provide mechanical cleaning
- Enzymatic dental rinses or gels applied to gums and teeth
- Daily dental treats like FELINE GREENIES™ Dental Treats

Regular Monitoring:

- Watch for changes in eating behavior, bad breath, or visible gum inflammation
- Schedule regular veterinary dental exams

Professional Care:

- Follow your veterinarian's recommendations for professional cleanings when needed

The specific combination that works best will depend on your individual cat's temperament and cooperation level. Some cats may tolerate wipes several times per week along with daily dental treats. Others may only accept dental treats and enzymatic rinses. The important thing is finding what works for your cat and maintaining that routine consistently.

The Bottom Line

Dr. Tom's message to cat owners struggling with dental care is both realistic and reassuring: perfection isn't required, but consistency is. If your cat won't tolerate brushing, don't give up on dental care altogether. Instead, implement the alternatives your cat will

accept—whether that's dental wipes, enzymatic products, dental treats, or a combination of all three.

The worst dental care plan is no plan at all. The best plan is one you can realistically maintain while keeping your cat comfortable and cooperative. By establishing daily habits your cat tolerates and pairing them with regular veterinary monitoring, you can support your cat's oral health without the struggle and stress of forced toothbrushing.

As Dr. Tom emphasizes, something is always better than nothing when it comes to feline dental care.



Meet Dr. Tom:

“As the Chief of Staff at Sturbridge Veterinary Hospital in Sturbridge, MA, I’ve spent the last nine years focusing on companion animal care, with a clinical focus on companion animal medicine, surgery, dentistry, and client education...and making veterinary medicine approachable for everyone. My journey into veterinary medicine started with a love for animals as a kid growing up on Long Island and was shaped by my education at UMass Amherst and St. George’s University (including clinical educational experiences affiliated with Cornell University). While I respect my early experience working with large animals, I’ve spent the last 9 years specializing in small-animal care for cats and dogs, which has always been my true passion.”

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