80% of dogs and 72% of cats have signs of gum disease by age 3.

Gum disease can cause bad breath, discolored teeth and more serious problems, including tooth loss and infection.

Brushing your pet's teeth regularly helps prevent gum disease. Here's how you do it:

Assemble the right tools. Choose a pet toothbrush or soft-bristled finger brush and toothpaste made just for pets in flavors like chicken or salmon. Don't use human toothpaste as it can upset your pet's stomach.

Start slowly. Place some paste on the brush and let your pet smell and taste it. Rub some paste on your pet's teeth and gums. Praise and reward your pet with a treat so they think of having their teeth brushed as a pleasant experience. Do this daily for a week.

Begin brushing. When it's time to brush, gently pull your pet's lips back and brush the outer surfaces of the teeth at a 45-degree angle for about 30 seconds. Gradually add more time and brush all tooth and gum surfaces. Remember to praise and reward your pet.

Follow up. Give your pet appropriate chew toys or dental treats between brushings and visit the vet at least once a year for a professional cleaning and dental health evaluation.

Guidelines recommended by the American Veterinary Medical Association. (www.avma.org)