

# Ferret Teeth and Dental Care for Ferrets

Alicia Drakiotes



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Ferrets have wonderful pearly whites, as my grandmother called them, beautiful functional teeth. They glisten and are bright white. Teeth are wondrous tools, they enable the ferret to eat, to grab onto and hold or move objects — actually like another hand— and they enable caretakers to estimate the age of a ferret by the appearance of them. Of course, ferret caretakers should realize that ferret teeth, like those of humans need proper care!!

The new ferret owner usually finds these teeth early on after the ferrets arrival as they start using their tiny teeth and chewing, this is due to the fact that baby ferrets are usually purchased with milk teeth. These milk teeth are replaced by the permanent canine teeth at about age 7-9 weeks of age. Ferrets also have incisor teeth on both the upper and lower jaw, most commonly you will see six of these incisors between the canines. The ferret teeth grow from the tip down toward the root, which is why older ferrets appear to have larger teeth. Of course as in humans, as the ferret gets older the gums will also start to recede, thus making the tooth again look larger than before.

Often owners will notice a chip or abrasion on a ferrets canine tooth. Usually, this is not an alarming condition. Ferrets love to chew their wire cages and sometimes an overzealous tug on the wire, or a fall onto a wood or tile floor will cause a chip or fracture of the ( usually upper) canine. If a fracture occurs usually this will not require special dental care UNLESS the pulp is exposed. Vets and owners however, should monitor the tooth for any signs of abscess or infection.

Dental hygiene for ferrets is a necessary, though not well understood part of regular ferret care. Owners who regularly or occasionally enter their domestic ferrets in ferret shows realize that dental hygiene is taken into consideration by the show judges, after all, good health involves good dental hygiene. However, the majority of ferret owners do not always realize that dental hygiene is very important for their ferrets overall health and well being. While most ferret owners are meticulous regarding the care and maintenance of their pets, many do not realize the importance or the necessity of good dental care.

## **What the Vets say.. and Why**

Ferrets, like other companion animals, benefit greatly from a dental care regimen. Most veterinarians recommend a twice monthly basic tooth brushing as a recommended basic oral hygiene care. (This is about on par with a feline's recommended dental care regimen) The reasons for a dental care regimen are varied. Basically, bacteria can enter the animal's system through inflamed gums, which are caused by

plaque buildup (commonly identified as periodontal disease). Periodontal disease can be a cause of several conditions in the ferret including: tooth root abscesses, endocarditis or periocarditis (heart disease), and low-grade chronic infections which can lead to: weight loss, susceptibility to infections in general, and lethargy.

Well rounded and knowledgeable ferret owners will opt for a few minutes to care for their pets teeth when weighing the odds against illness and infection. Some other health conditions which could be related to gum infections and poor teeth are enlarged spleens or splenomegaly. For as the infection smolders, the spleen enlarges, thus causing symptoms such as an enlarged mid section and lethargy. There are many reasons to provide care for your ferrets dental health!!!

The supplies for the maintenance. A feline toothbrush either latex thimble, or bristle brush, and some flavored pet toothpaste.

So, how do you brush a ferrets teeth? For routine maintenance at home, there are several toothbrushes on the market that can work remarkably well. Feline toothbrushes come in either the standard bristle toothbrush, or as I prefer, a latex finger toothbrush. The finger toothbrush is constructed of a pliable latex material, bristles and all, which fits over your index finger thimble style. These toothbrushes either bristled or latex are available in a variety of locations, your veterinarians office, pet supply or pet stores. Some folks opt to just wrap their ( owners)finger with gauze and apply the toothpaste to that... in either case what you are comfortable with and what will get the job done will work!!

In deciding which toothbrush to get for your ferret dental care you should first consider several things: How does your ferret deal with you handling it's mouth and teeth? If the ferret is young and still nippy, then the best brush would be a bristled brush. If your ferret is older and mellow and you interact regularly with care and maintenance the thimble style toothbrush should do just fine. Several companies manufacture the above mentioned items along with flavored toothpaste for pets. Scalers are also available from either pet supply houses or at ferret shows, or perhaps your veterinarian also offers these.

### **How to's...the brushing**

If you have never brushed your ferrets teeth, you may need to gradually get him or her used to having it's mouth manipulated. Start by gently massaging the ferrets cheeks and mouth with your finger. Over the course of several days, work up to rubbing his teeth and gums with your finger. when your ferret seems to tolerate this well, you can let him taste the toothpaste ( see below) and begin to introduce him to the toothbrush. You will probably want to scruff your ferret or have someone else hold him / her. Remember to be patient — this is a new experience for your ferret.

Using the toothbrush or finger toothbrush and a feline toothpaste (our ferrets seem to prefer malt flavor) gently massage the gums and the canine teeth. You will notice that the buildup of treats and soft food items cleans off very easily. The toothpaste is edible so there is no need for rinsing. Never use human toothpaste or baking soda on any pet's teeth, it can be harmful to the enamel. It is also advised to work back towards the molars to help reduce the tartar buildup in the areas that the tongue does not reach. This will reduce the need for frequent vet tooth cleanings. Crunchy food ( kibbled food) is recommended to help keep teeth clean, but it is not enough to do the entire job.

### **The dirty teeth ?? — tartar...where to start?**

If the ferrets teeth already have a heavy buildup of plaque, you will need to start by having your veterinarian do a dental scaling. This usually entails the ferret being put under anesthesia (isoflurane). Or, if your ferret is docile and you are knowledgeable and comfortable in doing so you can try this yourself without anesthesia. You may find that your vet will show you how to scale your ferrets teeth and provide instructions should you ask. A dental scaling cleans the surfaces below and above the gum line and should be done when you notice the teeth do not appear white anymore. The tan color material (plaque) is usually very soft and can be removed easily. If it is allowed to remain it will turn into tartar. Tartar (grayish or greenish spots on the teeth, usually most visible on the molars) can differ in color from a greenish, brownish or yellowish color. It may take on a reddish tint if the gums bleed from

irritation and stains the tartar. Tartar is a hardened buildup which causes irritation to the gums, and infection in advanced stages, this is why it is imperative to keep the ferrets teeth clean.

#### **Do it yourself'ers Scaling....**

To scale your ferrets teeth you will need a dental instrument or scraper. These scrapers are available from either pet supply houses or at pet shows. Some of the scrapers differ in design, some have pointier ends, while others are shovel ended, others have more rounded ends. In some cases using your fingernail will work for plaque and tartar below the gum line, however owners should be aware that the tartar above the gum line is important to remove as well. Developing a technique for scaling will depend on the type of tool you use, and how aggressive the build up of tartar is on the teeth. The motion will be either side to side ( a scrubbing motion) or up and down ( starting at the gum line or just under and above it and pulling down where you pull the tartar off the tooth. You may need to break up the heavily built up areas and by applying pressure in the center this aids in the break up of the tartar on the tooth. It is well advised after scaling to either brush the teeth, or buff them with a gauze wrapped around your finger. This buffs the sharp edges which may be left from scraping and also cleans away any debris left from the scaling.

It should be understood that a vet tooth cleaning may be required for scaling the tartar off your ferrets teeth about every one to two years for optimum dental health. How often your ferret needs a veterinary tooth scaling will vary according to your ferrets diet. Ferrets who eat soft foods ( not recommended unless health condition requires) and treats will require more frequent dental cleanings.