



Don't Make This Popular 'Oral Care' Mistake With Your Pet

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By Dr. Becker

If you're like a lot of pet owners, you may have recently learned your dog or cat has plaque buildup on his teeth and is in danger of developing gum disease. With that concern in mind, you might also have suddenly noticed how many commercial pet foods and treats claim to be beneficial for your pet's teeth.

Before you pick up a bag of one of those "oral care" formulas, you might want to understand a little more about how such products can make the claim that they help keep your pet's teeth clean.

According to PetfoodIndustry.com:

"Regardless of the claim or labeling, a 'dental product' is limited to the foods' 'mechanical (e.g., abrasive) action' on the teeth (AAFCO, 2012). No references to chemical or antimicrobial additives are permitted without prior Food and Drug Administration approval. Despite this, most of the products with a dental message depend on food additives to enhance the 'mechanical action.' Generally these are mineral sequestering agents-a leading one being sodium hexametaphosphate (SHMP)."

Pet food manufacturers coat their "dental care" kibble and treats with this additive. SHMP has an insulating effect on calcium and other minerals in your pet's mouth that has been shown to discourage the formation of dental plaque and periodontal disease.

Is Sodium Hexametaphosphate Safe?

According to the [Material Safety Data Sheet](#) (MSDS) for sodium hexametaphosphate, in humans the chemical can be hazardous if ingested, and slightly hazardous if it comes in contact with the skin or is inhaled. Potential health effects on humans include skin irritation, eye irritation, respiratory tract irritation with coughing and shortness of breath, GI tract irritation with nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, behavioral/CNS/PNS symptoms, renal failure, acute tubular necrosis, heart disturbances, decreased levels of calcium in the blood, systemic metabolic acidosis, and muscle spasms or tremors.

In a study published in the *International Journal of Toxicology*, rats fed a 10% concentration of SHMP developed pale and swollen kidneys. Chronic use in animals resulted in growth inhibition, increased kidney weights, bone decalcification, parathyroid hypertrophy and hyperplasia, inorganic phosphaturia, hepatic focal necrosis, and muscle fiber size alterations. The chemical is also a severe skin irritant in rabbits at certain concentrations.

[DogFoodAdvisor](#) considers SHMP a controversial ingredient and describes it as "a man-made industrial polymer with no known nutritive value." The substance is found in soaps, detergents, water treatment products and photographic products. It is also used in the manufacture of paper, for scale removal, and for metal finishing.

I agree with DogFoodAdvisor that "food is not the place for tartar control chemicals or any other non-nutritive substances."

Tips for Keeping Your Pet's Mouth Clean and Healthy

Rather than roll the dice on a commercial "dental care" pet food or treat that won't, by itself, keep your pet's mouth healthy (and quite likely isn't optimally nutritious), I recommend taking the following steps instead:

Story at-a-glance

- » Have you noticed how many "oral care" pet foods and treats are on store shelves these days? Pet food companies are hoping to capitalize on the scourge of dental disease in today's dogs and cats.
- » The ingredient in many of these "dental care" products is sodium hexametaphosphate (SHMP). Pet food manufacturers coat their kibble and treats with this additive. SHMP has an insulating effect on calcium and other minerals in the mouth that reduces dental plaque.
- » SHMP is an industrial polymer with no nutritional value. It is used in a wide range of non-food products (including soaps, detergents, and water treatment products) and in our view simply doesn't belong in the food you offer your pet.
- » Rather than attempt to clean your pet's mouth with "dental care" commercial foods or treats, we recommend daily oral home care, a raw diet, and regular oral exams by a veterinarian.


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- Practice dental home care. In other words, learn how to brush your pet's teeth and do it consistently (daily if your pet is older or at least several times a week for younger pets).
- Feed a balanced, species-appropriate raw diet. As your pet chews the bones in her raw diet, they help to scrape away tartar and plaque on her teeth. The cartilage, ligaments and tendons in the raw meat act as a natural dental floss.
- If your pet is a dog, offer an all-natural, fully digestible, high-quality dental chew bone.
- Schedule regular oral exams with your vet, and professional cleanings under anesthesia as required.

If you choose to use dental care products for your pet, it's important to remember they don't take the place of daily brushing, a raw species-appropriate diet, or regular veterinary oral health exams.

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