

PUPPY TEETH – A VETERINARIAN’S VIEW

Your new puppy may only have baby teeth for a short while, but there are several important things about puppy teeth that pet owners should know.

Puppies usually start getting their deciduous (aka ‘baby’) teeth at just a couple of weeks old. These 28 baby teeth are gradually replaced by 42 adult teeth between 3 and 7 months of age.

When you first get a new puppy your vet will conduct a full oral exam. Even though puppy teeth aren’t around for very long, any abnormalities may affect his adult dentition and overall oral health.

We want to make sure that all teeth are present. If a tooth is missing, dental x-rays are recommended to make sure it’s not un-erupted and embedded in the jaw bone. If this happens it can contribute to painful cysts and infections, and prevent the adult tooth from emerging.

Your vet will also check for orthodontic abnormalities. Canine teeth have a very specific alignment to allow the top and bottom teeth to interlock appropriately. If your puppy’s bite is abnormal he can develop jaw problems, chewing difficulties, trauma to the gums or palate, and overly worn or fractured teeth.

During the teething process your puppy may want to chew a lot, but overall you may not notice a huge difference in behavior. Most of the time we don’t even realize when they have lost a tooth. The baby teeth are quite small, so they frequently get lost or even swallowed. You may notice a very small amount of blood on chew toys. The gums may appear slightly red as new teeth come in.

Around 6 to 7 months of age, we check for retained deciduous teeth. The baby tooth should fall out before the adult tooth comes in. If the deciduous and adult tooth are occupying the same space, the deciduous tooth is considered retained. This is a common problem, especially in small breed dogs. The canine teeth are the most frequently retained teeth.

If I notice retained baby teeth, I will usually leave them a month or so to come out on their own. If they don’t, I recommend that they be extracted. If left in place they will result in crowding, plaque and tartar buildup. They may even cause displacement of the adult tooth as it fully merges.

Any tooth extraction requires general anesthesia. Since many puppies are being spayed or neutered around this age, I often recommend that any retained deciduous teeth be removed at the time of surgery. This way your pup doesn't need to be put under anesthesia twice.

Home care is important to prevent periodontal disease as your dog ages. Daily brushing of teeth can prevent plaque, which is a bacterial film that forms on teeth. Plaque eventually leads to tartar and calculus buildup, bad breath, gingivitis, and infection.

I don't typically recommend brushing the baby teeth. Because your puppy is teething the teeth may be tender and your dog will associate brushing as an unpleasant experience. However, you can condition your pup to get him used to his mouth being touched/handled.

Lift his lip up and gently touch the teeth and gums, then provide a nice reward. This can make it easier for you to brush later on. It may even help you give your dog oral medications in the future and help your vet perform oral exams.

Many new pet owners inquire about appropriate chew toys for puppies. While chewing can provide a helpful distraction for dogs and pups, it is important to choose safe products.

- If your puppy can destroy or swallow a chew toy he is at risk for stomach upset or gastrointestinal obstruction
- If a product is too hard he is at increased risk for fractured teeth

The general rule is that if it would hurt to smack your knee with a bone, then it's too hard to give to your puppy, or even your dog. Even some dental chew sticks are labeled for adult dogs only because they can be too hard on fragile puppy teeth.

Firm, yet pliable, products like [Kong toys](#) are usually the safest puppy chew toys. Rope toys can be okay to chew on but games such as tug of war should be avoided to prevent trauma to the teeth.

I often direct my clients to the American Veterinary Dental College for the most current information regarding canine oral health. Another useful organization is

the Veterinary Oral Health Council which lists products that have received their seal of approval for dental health.

Dental disease can have a significant impact on a dog's overall health and quality of life. **If you take good care of your puppy's teeth at an early age you will set him up for good health in the future.**

Author: Dr. Megan Teiber, DVM