

Up to 80% of Cats Suffer This Permanent Condition by Age 3, Does Yours?

Removing this known trigger can prevent it. And as much as your cat might not appreciate these types of 'invasions' it's necessary to protect them from the harm of heart conditions - or so they don't suddenly stop grooming themselves. Here's what to start doing today.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Too few cat parents are keeping tabs on the health of their kitty's mouth; 70% to 80% of kitties have gum disease by age 3
- Some of the signs of gum disease in cats include inflamed gums, bad breath, difficulty eating and drooling
- If plaque and tartar are not removed from your kitty's teeth, the end result will be irreversible gum disease and potentially, other health problems as well
- The best way to keep your cat's mouth healthy is with daily brushing, the right diet and regular veterinary oral exams

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When it comes to your kitty's oral health, seeing is not believing. In fact, unless you've been brushing those tiny teeth regularly, chances are you've not actually seen deep inside your cat's mouth. Kitties who've been taught to tolerate human hands in and around their mouths will often put up with visual inspections, but as a general rule, they don't appreciate bodily "invasions" of this sort.

That said, even if your cat lets you peek and poke around in her mouth, if she has oral disease, it's often occurring below the gum line, hidden from view. Bacteria that can't be seen with the naked eye can damage the tissues connecting the teeth and jaw. Believe it or not, 70% to 80% of cats (and dogs) have gum disease by the age of 3.

Here's How Dirty Teeth Can Cause Much Bigger Problems for Your Cat

Plaque that collects on your kitty's teeth hardens into tartar within a few days. Tartar sticks to the teeth and begins to irritate the gums. Irritated gums then progress to the inflammatory condition called gingivitis. Cats with gingivitis have red rather than pink gums, and they often also have unpleasant breath. Other signs of gum disease can include:

- Difficulty eating or chewing on only one side of the mouth
- Lack of appetite
- Drooling
- Mild swelling of the face

- Bleeding from the mouth and/or nose

Another sign of oral disease in kitties is lack of grooming, resulting in a dull or greasy or matted coat. If the tartar on your cat's teeth isn't removed, it accumulates under the gums, eventually causing them to pull away from the teeth. This creates small pockets in the gum tissue that trap additional bacteria in the mouth.

At this stage, your kitty is dealing with an irreversible condition called periodontal disease, which not only causes significant pain, but can also result in abscesses, infections, loose or missing teeth, and bone loss. How quickly this process takes place depends on several factors, including your **cat's age**, overall health, diet, breed, genetics, and the frequency and quality of dental care she receives.

What many pet parents don't realize is their cat's oral health can affect more than just her mouth. There's an established link between gum disease and heart disease in humans and dogs (studies on cats are scarce, but it's reasonable to assume a similar link exists for felines).

Researchers also suspect certain strains of oral bacteria may lead to heart problems. Some types of bacteria found in the mouth produce sticky proteins that can adhere to artery walls, causing them to thicken. Mouth bacteria are also known to promote the formation of blood clots that can damage the heart.

3 Ways to Keep Your Cat's Teeth and Gums Healthy

- **Daily brushing** — Brush your cat's teeth, preferably every day. A little time spent each day brushing his teeth can reap tremendous benefits in terms of his oral health and overall well-being. It can also potentially save you money, because he may not need as many professional teeth cleanings during his lifetime.

With patience and persistence on your part, most kitties can learn to submit to daily tooth brushing. One of the secrets to success is to progress slowly and gently, allowing your cat to adapt at his own pace. Start with your finger rather than a toothbrush and get him accustomed to having your finger in his mouth. Gently rub the top front teeth and all the way to the back teeth. Then do the same on the lower teeth.

Praise your cat often and keep sessions short. Once he's accepting of the presence of your finger in his mouth, wrap a very thin damp cloth or piece of gauze around your fingertip and rub the teeth. The next step is to use a safe, natural dental cleaning product designed for pets and apply a small amount to the gauze before you rub his teeth. Once he gets used to this, you can progress to either a finger brush or a soft toothbrush the right size for his mouth.

If kitty is really uncomfortable having his teeth rubbed or brushed, there are enzyme-based products available that when applied to the teeth go to work to break down plaque and tartar without brushing. However, the more rubbing and brushing he'll allow, the more quickly you'll see results, and the easier it will be to maintain his oral health.

- **The right diet** — Your cat's diet plays a significant role in the amount of tartar he collects on his teeth. Raw diets, even prepared, ground raw diets, help control tartar. Raw ground bone is a gentle dental abrasive that acts like fine sandpaper when chewed, which helps remove debris stuck on teeth.

Raw meat contains natural enzymes, and in addition, raw food doesn't stick to teeth, unlike starchy kibble. Don't buy into the myth that **kibble** helps keep teeth clean.

However, it's important to realize that even raw-fed pets acquire plaque and tartar (usually less, and at a slower rate, but the myth that all raw fed pets will never need oral care is indeed a myth), so don't assume food alone will save your kitty from dental disease.

Since cats don't gnaw on recreational bones like dogs do, offering a skinless chicken neck may entice your cat to chew more, and provide enough mechanical abrasion to help prevent plaque buildup.

Additionally, there are a few supplements that research shows improve gum health and the oral microbiome, including [ubiquinol](#) and probiotics. Adding these supplements to your cat's protocol can improve his oral defenses and reduce the rate at which degeneration occurs.

- **Regular wellness exams** — Take your cat for regular wellness exams and ask your veterinarian to perform an oral exam during these visits. If your vet thinks kitty needs a more thorough exam, x-rays and/or prophylaxis (teeth cleaning) under anesthesia, I encourage you not to put it off. Too many cats suffer needlessly with mouth problems that can be easily resolved or prevented in the first place.

Cats are experts at hiding pain, no matter where it occurs in their bodies. That's why it's very important that you and your veterinarian proactively monitor the condition of your cat's mouth.

If you're conscientious about your kitty's dental home care and he doesn't have any special situations that predispose him to tartar buildup or other dental issues, you can keep professional cleanings to a minimum. However, cats with extreme tartar buildup, badly inflamed gums or oral infections will need extra help.

5 Interesting Facts About Your Cat's Teeth

1. **Like humans, cats start out with baby teeth** — Cats are diphyodonts — animals with two successive sets of teeth — the deciduous or "baby" teeth, and the permanent set that erupt from the gums as the baby teeth loosen and fall out. Kittens are born toothless and their baby teeth start coming in at about 2 weeks of age. At around 4 months, the baby teeth start falling out to make room for the permanent set.

Cats have 26 baby teeth and 30 permanent teeth; humans have 20 baby teeth and 32 permanent teeth; and dogs have 28 baby and 42 permanent teeth.
2. **Your cat's teeth are those of a true carnivore** — As obligate carnivores who must eat animal meat to survive, cats' teeth are made for the job. They are sharp and designed for seizing prey and tearing flesh. Kitties have no flat teeth shaped for grinding plant food like humans do. In addition, there's a groove on the outside of the canine teeth or fangs that is sometimes called the "bleeding groove" or "blood groove," which is designed to allow blood to flow past the tooth as the cat bites down on prey.
3. **The tiniest teeth in your kitty's mouth serve a different purpose** — The incisors, which are the teeny teeth in between the canines in the front of your cat's mouth, don't play much of a role in hunting, but they're excellent grooming tools. If you've seen your cat during grooming sessions tug at something caught in his fur, he's probably using his incisors to work the debris free. Kitties also often use their incisors for scratching and to remove loose pieces of nail from their claws.
4. **Look ma, no cavities!** — Your cat doesn't get cavities, unlike you (or your dog), thanks to the shape of her tiny choppers. Because their teeth don't have horizontal surfaces, cavity-causing sugar-eating bacteria have no pits or divots in which to set up shop.

5. **In worst case scenarios, tooth extractions aren't the end of the world for indoor kitties** — For a variety of reasons, many cat parents and most veterinarians have lots of experience with kitties who are missing some or all of their teeth.

While this isn't an ideal situation and the goal is to prevent cats from getting to the point of requiring extractions, fortunately, most cats make a fast adjustment to having fewer teeth and continue to eat well (and many develop an increased appetite once their painful mouth condition is resolved). They go on to live long, happy, healthy lives. To your cat, being pain-free is much more important than having a mouth full of teeth.

Sources and References

[PetMD](#)
