

Is Your Dog at Risk From This Popular Treat?

Learn why a favorite dog chew can cause painful fractures, infections and even facial fistulas. Veterinarians provide insights into the dangers of this treat and offer safer alternatives to ensure your pet's dental health and overall happiness.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Antlers are very popular dog chews, but unfortunately, veterinarians are seeing a lot of broken teeth caused by these very hard recreational bones, including carnassial teeth in the back of dogs' mouths
- Broken teeth are painful and can lead to a bacterial infection that destroys the root of the tooth, resulting in bone loss that requires extraction or root canal therapy
- In selecting recreational bones or chews, the key is to pair the personality, breed, age, and tooth condition of your dog with the right type of chew; antlers and other very hard bones should never be offered to aggressive chewers

Veterinarian Dr. Eileen Fatcheric, writing for Whole Dog Journal, warns pet parents, “Do NOT give your dog antler chews.”¹

“The biggest risk to your dog from chewing on antlers is broken teeth,” she writes. “Commercially sold antlers, usually deer or elk, are extremely hard with an unforgiving surface, like a rock or concrete. Would you let your dog chew on rocks or concrete? Of course not!”

An increasing number of veterinarians are discouraging dog guardians from offering very hard chews, including antlers, due to the potential for broken teeth. They're seeing an increase in fractured **carnassial teeth**, and while broken teeth are common in dogs, fractures in back teeth are not.

Anything your dog chews on that is harder than his teeth can cause a fracture, largely due to the force with which dogs are able to bite down. This typically occurs when a dog moves the chew or bone toward the back of his mouth on one side and chomps down on it.

When Your Dog Cracks a Tooth

When your dog breaks a tooth, the pulp — which is the sensitive nerve inside — can be exposed. Not only is an exposed nerve extremely painful, it can also lead to a deep infection and root abscess.

“Broken teeth are painful for your dog and often lead to infection and tooth root abscesses,” says Fatcheric. “Fractured teeth frequently require surgical extraction, subjecting your dog to an expensive and painful procedure for something that is completely preventable.”

Most pets with tooth fractures don't show obvious signs of pain, but sadly, many suffer silently for weeks, months, or even years before the situation progresses to the point where they can't eat comfortably and lose their appetite. The longer a broken tooth goes untreated, the worse it gets.

Oral bacteria can infect the tooth pulp and cause it to die. The infection then often moves from the root tip to the bone, destroying it. In severe cases, the infection moves past the bone into the skin, forming a facial fistula (a hole in the face through which the infection drains).

Fortunately, not all broken teeth are so serious. If only the enamel has been fractured, the tooth can often be smoothed to remove sharp edges. However, if x-rays indicate the tooth is dead, if pulp is visible, or if the tooth has turned from white to pink, purple, grey, or black, treatment typically involves either extraction or root canal therapy.

It's important for every dog parent to understand that a fractured tooth requires prompt veterinary care. Fatcheric makes the point that antlers can also crack or splinter, resulting in a choking hazard, esophageal foreign body, or intestinal blockage.

Antlers and Other Hard Chews Fracture a Lot of Teeth

It's extremely important to choose appropriate recreational bones for your dog to avoid fractures and other chew bone-related damage.

There are some dogs for which no bone or chew is appropriate because they are just too aggressive, or they've already broken too many teeth. Even raw bones can be a problem for these dogs, along with antlers and Nylabones. Anything you can't put a dent in with your fingernail has the potential to fracture the crown of your dog's tooth.

It's very important to pair the personality, breed, age, and tooth condition of the dog with the right type of chew. One size does not fit all when it comes to recreational chews and bones.

Recreational Bones for Forceful Chewers

The first thing to ask yourself: "Is my dog an aggressive chewer?" This type of chewer is more interested in eating the bone than leisurely gnawing on it. She wants to scarf the whole thing, and the sooner, the better.

Many aggressive chewers fracture their teeth. They acquire multiple slab fractures in their eagerness to break the bone down as quickly as possible. These dogs get hold of a bone and chew like mad, fracturing or wearing down their teeth very quickly.

If this describes your dog, needless to say, she shouldn't be given hard bones like antlers or marrowbones smaller than the size of her head. I also advise against thin or narrow bones that fit nicely into her mouth, allowing her to apply a strong vertical bite force.

Aggressive chewers can sometimes be offered big, raw knucklebones, which are much softer than rock hard antlers and are gentler on teeth. Needless to say, it's crucial that you monitor your pet's chewing very closely, because dogs can whittle a large bone down to the size of a ping-pong ball in about an hour.

Once a bone is that small, it's too small to be safe, so watch your dog closely and when she has worked a bone down significantly, take it away.

Are Antlers Ever a Good Idea?

If your dog happens to be a soft chewer who just enjoys holding or gently gnawing on a bone, antlers may be a good choice. You can purchase elk, moose, or deer antlers, and they're very economical because they last forever.

Antlers come in a variety of sizes and can be split, cut or whole, but again, you don't want to give a small antler to a large dog because of the potential for tooth fracture. Giving small antlers to small dogs and big antlers to big dogs is fine, but first you want to make sure they're gentle chewers.

Remember: soft bones for hard chewers, hard bones for soft chewers. Fatcheric's opinion is that antlers are just not worth the risk. She writes:

“Regardless of the positive aspects of antlers, there are plenty of safer choices for your dog to chew. Whether you choose to give your dog antlers to or not depends on the amount of risk you are willing to take. In my professional opinion, they are definitely not worth the risk.”

Sources and References

¹ [Whole Dog Journal, March 20, 2024](#)
