

What You Need to Know About Puppy and Kitten Teeth and Their Care

Puppies and kittens arrive as adorable, new little family members that we are eager to show off, and it is exciting to purchase that new collar, ID tag, leash, litter box, bed, toys and the very best food. Soon you realize that BLAH training is necessary (Brushing teeth, Leash And House training). If you start these early, your task is easier—and brushing teeth is most important because it will immediately contribute to a long, comfortable life for your dear little pet. Unbeknownst to most people, the most common disease in dogs and cats is gingivitis and periodontal disease, and no pet is spared unless home dental care is performed. When a new pet joins a family, it is easy to be excited and eager to provide “the best” for the new member of the family, but it is also easy to overlook the importance of introducing tooth brushing and doing proper training so the pet actually learns to enjoy and look forward to tooth brushing.

We encourage new puppy and kitten parents to immediately obtain a new pet toothbrush and the toothpaste that is especially designed and flavored for pets. They are both available here at Animal Hospital of North Asheville. You can start toothbrush training a puppy or kitten as early as 6 weeks of age. It is important to start the training off right.

There are some variations by breed, but kittens and puppies typically have the “baby” (deciduous) teeth visible and in place by eight weeks of age. As a general rule, the first permanent teeth to come in are the upper center two incisors (the little nibble teeth between the upper canine teeth), which are typically visible at 4 months of age. These permanent incisors will be slightly larger than the baby teeth beside them. If you are trying to determine your puppy’s age, you can use the arrival of these teeth to fairly accurately determine that your pet was born four months earlier. Over the next 2 months, the deciduous teeth should fall out while new permanent teeth take their place. Even though the baby teeth fall out, it is important to start brushing as soon as possible to get yourself and your pet in the habit of making dental care a part of the daily routine.

Although your veterinarian will examine your puppy or kitten's teeth at each visit to determine that they are developing normally, it is important for you to also be on the lookout for developmental problems so they will be caught as early as possible. Below are the seven most common problems, Please be aware that there are many more that are less common, so don't hesitate to have your veterinarian check anything that does not seem quite right.

1. **Retained Deciduous (baby) Teeth** – If a permanent tooth comes in beside the baby tooth, then the baby tooth can gently “push” the permanent tooth out of alignment which can cause serious bite problems (malocclusion) and early periodontal disease. If you see the permanent and the baby tooth at the same time, please have this confirmed by a doctor, then corrected. This should be done promptly.

2. **Base Narrow Canine Teeth** - In some puppies, one or both of the lower two canine/fang baby teeth and or permanent teeth will be positioned abnormally toward the center of the mouth. When these teeth fully erupt, they often poke into the roof of the mouth and can be very painful and cause infection. Addressing this problem when your pet is as young as possible makes it easier to correct.
3. **Periodontal Disease** – Periodontal infection is the most common disease of dogs and cats in America – even more common than fleas. Eighty percent of dogs and seventy percent of cats have periodontal disease by age 3 years. Gingivitis is often present by age 1 year and quickly progresses to periodontal disease which affects oral health, oral comfort and quality of life. Ideally, we never want tartar to form on your pet’s teeth SO PLEASE begin a home care program today before permanent changes begin.
4. **Missing Teeth** – A puppy may be born without one or more teeth, which is not a problem. However, sometimes a tooth is “hidden” below the gum line and is termed non-erupted. If a tooth is not visible by 8 months of age, the space should be x-rayed since non-erupted teeth can form a cyst that can painlessly harm the jaw or even cause jaw fracture unless corrected.
5. **Fractured Teeth** – Life long, avoid HARD TOYS or FOOD such a real bones or deer antlers or any very hard substance. Baby teeth and permanent teeth less than a year of age are weaker than adult teeth and very prone to fracture. Any fractured tooth is ALWAYS uncomfortable and should be treated.
6. **Malocclusions** - Poorly aligned teeth are often a genetic problem starting at birth and may initially be subtle. The upper or lower jaw may be too long or short or one side of the mandible may be longer or shorter than the other. Many malocclusions require no intervention but others, such as dental interlock where the teeth can prevent the lower jaw from growing properly, require very early (6 to 8 wks of age) intervention. Veterinary orthodontics is never used for appearance. It is utilized with painful conditions so the pet can be comfortable and functional.
7. **Cleft Palate** – Congenital deformity is a fissure or opening in the roof of the mouth, best treated in young pets. These can communicate into the nasal cavity and milk, water or food may come out nostrils.

There are other dental problems that puppies can develop. If you see something that you are unsure about, please have your puppy examined.