

# Teeth and oral health

[cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)



A stylized silhouette of a cat is the central focus, rendered in two shades of purple and blue. The cat is shown in profile, facing right, with its head tilted upwards and its right front paw raised. The background is a solid, dark blue. The text is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the image, overlaid on the cat's body.

**Just as with people dental issues  
are quite common at some point  
in your cat's life.**

Cats commonly suffer with disorders of the teeth, jaw and gums. You may not know your cat is in pain because they hide signs of discomfort so well and may continue eating and drinking normally. The good news is that following treatment for teeth or other oral problems, cats usually appear to be much happier. Maintaining good oral health is likely to extend and improve the quality of your cat's life.

Your vet will often examine your cat's mouth at their annual check-up. You may be surprised by the severity of teeth problems your cat may be hiding. More obvious signs of oral health issues include:

- reduced grooming, which leads to poor coat condition
- bad breath
- drooling
- discomfort when eating
- pawing at the mouth
- bleeding gums
- reduced appetite or weight loss

If your cat is showing any of these symptoms it's best to get them checked out by your vet.

## The teeth

Kittens have 26 baby teeth which are replaced by 30 adult teeth by the time they reach around six months of age. Cats use their teeth for catching prey and to defend themselves against other cats or predators, as well as for chewing food. Each tooth sits within a space in the jawbone and is held in place by tough ligaments. Teeth are made up of:

- an outer surface
  - Enamel covers the crown section, the white part seen in the mouth
  - Cementum, a thin layer of hard dental tissue, covers the hidden root sections which are the parts embedded in the jawbone
- an inner dentine, which surrounds the pulp cavity containing the sensitive nerve and blood supply to the tooth. Dentine is the main supporting structure of the tooth

## **Gingivitis**

Gingivitis is inflammation of the gums. It occurs due to bacterial plaque on the teeth and can be seen as redness or bleeding gums. Depending on the extent and cause treatment may include home dental care or teeth cleaning under general anaesthetic. Your vet may advise specific food designed to help clean the teeth. Home dental care and routine dental checks help to prevent or control gingivitis. If gingivitis isn't treated it can lead to tooth loss.

### **Juvenile gingivitis**

Mild gingivitis may occur when a kitten's adult teeth are coming through, this can often go unnoticed. In some young cats, this becomes more severe and doesn't resolve after the teeth have come through. Gum tissue around the teeth can overgrow, this is called 'gingival hyperplasia'. Treatment includes reducing any build-up of bacteria in the mouth, pain relief and in more severe cases cats may require assessment, cleaning and treatments under anaesthetic.

## **Feline chronic gingivo-stomatitis (FCGS)**

Some cats suffer from a more serious inflammation of the mouth. This painful condition varies in severity but can lead to bleeding, very inflamed gums and even growths in the mouth.

Three main factors which may cause or make FCGS worse are:

- a reaction to bacteria and plaque on the teeth
- a poorly functioning immune system, possibly due to other diseases with viruses that affect the immune system, such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV)
- other underlying viral infections, such as feline calicivirus (FCV)

The cat's immune system responds excessively to plaque and leads to chronic and often severe inflammation.

Treatment involves trying to eliminate plaque. In milder cases, pain relief and a thorough clean of the teeth and assessment under anaesthetic may help.

In some cats, to fully remove the bacteria which cause the immune reaction, removal of some or all of the teeth will be needed. This means there is no place for plaque to build. Cats cope well without any teeth, especially once their mouth becomes free from pain, and removal of all the teeth will cure the problem in around half of affected cats. Unfortunately, some cases cannot be cured, and long-term treatment may be required to manage the condition.

## **Periodontal disease**

Periodontal disease is the result of ongoing gingivitis and dental disease. Weakening occurs in the structures around the tooth that support them; the gum, the ligaments, and the bone of the jaw. 'Pockets' of space develop around the tooth which allows bacteria to enter. The ongoing inflammation that results can cause bone loss and can ultimately lead to tooth loss. It is usually caused by plaque in the mouth. Plaque is always present in the cat's mouth but can build up and cause a hard yellow-grey substance, known as tartar, to form on the tooth. Tartar attracts more plaque, and the process continues.

There are natural defences against plaque, but these may not be enough. Factors that can contribute to plaque and tartar formation include:

- other diseases, for example some infectious diseases and kidney disease
- abnormal positioning of the teeth
- diet
- saliva acidity, the bacteria within the mouth and the cat's individual genetics
- age
- lack of home dental care

Once tartar is present, a dental procedure under anaesthetic will be required. If the problem isn't too severe, the teeth will be cleaned above and below the gum line. Combined with home dental care and regular check-ups, this can be an effective treatment for mild cases.

Tooth removal will be necessary where there is advanced periodontal disease.

It is important that dental disease is managed to control any discomfort, prevent tooth loss and to ensure overall health and wellness.



Home dental care, such as tooth brushing is important to manage and prevent dental disease. Some cats can be trained to accept teeth brushing, and it helps if you can start to do this while your cat is young. Home dental care may not remove the need for veterinary dental treatments but can be useful to help control long-term issues.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/dental-care](https://cats.org.uk/dental-care)

## **Tooth resorption**

Tooth resorption is one of the most common dental disorders found in cats. The tooth's structure is actively broken down and 'reabsorbed' by cells within the teeth.

This can be seen in cats of all ages but is more common as cats get older. This disease usually starts with the smaller cheek teeth, but all teeth can be affected. It often happens symmetrically on both sides of the mouth. The underlying cause is currently unknown.

At first small holes may be seen in the tooth's outer surface, close to where the tooth meets the gum. The gum may grow into the hole, so it may look like a spread of the gum tissue into the tooth. Over time, the defect extends and causes damage, breakage and even loss of the crown of the tooth.

Tooth resorption of the crown is very painful. If touched, it often causes the cat to 'chatter' their teeth.

Resorption can also occur under the gumline, where the tooth root is gradually replaced by the bone of the jaw. Eventually, there may be no root visible on a dental x-ray.

Affected teeth will need to be removed, or where the root has resorbed and been replaced by bone, the crown of the tooth removed. This is performed under anaesthetic and the treatment is decided based on x-rays and thorough examination of the tooth. Unfortunately, there is no way to stop other teeth becoming similarly affected. Regular monitoring of the remaining teeth is therefore recommended.

### **Tooth fractures**

Tooth fractures are common in cats. The long, sharp canine teeth are the most frequently affected and if the sensitive pulp cavity is exposed, they will usually require removal. Root canal treatment can be an alternative to tooth removal but requires referral to a specialist veterinary dentist.

## **Abnormal tooth development**

Cats may retain their baby teeth alongside their adult teeth, most commonly the canines. This is rare in cats, and the recommended treatment is to remove the baby teeth under anaesthetic.

Cats may also encounter problems when their teeth come through too closely together, or they develop too many or too few teeth. Irregular shape, structure or position of teeth can also cause issues. These problems may be inherited, more common in certain breeds, and can lead to the development of dental disease.

## **The jaw**

The jaw comprises two lower (mandible) bones which are joined by cartilage in the middle of a cat's chin. The mandible has joints each side with the two upper jaw (maxillary) bones.

### **Fractures**

Damage to the jaw is often caused by traumatic incidents. A common site of injury is the 'symphysis', the weak area at the front of the chin where the two lower jaw bones meet. This condition causes pain, jaw instability and difficulty with eating and usually requires wire implants for repair. Affected cats often recover extremely well.

A fracture of the actual mandible bones rather than injury to the symphysis will usually require more complex surgery.

Traumatic incidents, such as falling from a high building, can also cause defects to the hard palate in the roof of the mouth which can be more difficult to repair and may require referral to a specialist surgeon.

## **Soft tissues of the mouth**

Disease of the gums, tongue and palate can be caused by:

- infection with calicivirus, causing painful ulcers.  
Find out more: [cats.org.uk/cat-flu](https://cats.org.uk/cat-flu)
- sores and ulcers which can develop in the mouth as a result of allergies
- cancer, which is most common in older cats and requires biopsies for diagnosis
- wounds, especially from cat fights
- foreign material which may become stuck in the mouth or buried into the soft tissues

## **Treatment of oral health issues**

The treatment required, as recommended by your vet will depend on your cat's particular issues, but may include:

- control of contributing factors where possible
- removal of plaque/tartar above and below the gum line (under anaesthetic)
- removal of teeth when necessary
- supportive care to tempt appetite
- surgical repair
- long-term oral medication, such as anti-inflammatory drugs
- home dental care

## **Looking for cat advice?**

The following vet-approved guides are available as PDF downloads from [cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)

## Essential guides

- Caring for your cat W84001
- Welcome home W84002
- Moving home W84003
- Feeding and obesity W84004
- Keeping your cat safe W84005
- Neutering W84006
- When to let go W84007
- Microchipping W84008
- Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009
- Managing your cat's behaviour W84010
- Cats living together W84011
- Indoor and outdoor cats W84012
- Cats and people W84014
- Caring for your kitten W84015
- Elderly cats W84016
- Feral cats W84017
- Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

## Veterinary guides

- Arthritis W83201
- Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202
- Itchy cats and skin disorders W83204
- Kidney or renal disease W83206
- Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209
- Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211
- Hyperthyroidism W83212
- Teeth and oral health W83214
- Fleas and other parasites W83215
- Cat flu W83216
- Infectious disease and vaccination W83217
- Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

---

## Please see [cats.org.uk](https://www.cats.org.uk) for more information on:

- Cats and the law
- Diabetes
- Feline parvovirus (FPV)
- Cats with disabilities
- Hypertension
- Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)
- Feline asthma
- You and your vet
- Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to [cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)



Cats Protection is a registered charity 203644 (England and Wales), SC037711 (Scotland) and is listed as a Section 167 institution by the Charity Commission of Northern Ireland.

VET\_1198 | W83214