WHEN PUPPY TEETH NEED HELP

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Most people tend to think of dental disease as a problem only in old animals with periodontal disease. However, many puppies and kittens can have painful oral health issues that need treatment. Just because they are eating and playing does not mean they do not have pain. This is a very common misconception!

Pain can be especially hidden in young animals. Because they often have not known life without dental pain, they just assume that pain is part of life and go on about their day being a puppy. Think about the people you know with chronic knee pain, or maybe back pain. Most people with chronic pain don’t act much different than the rest of us. They still go to work, and go to the grocery store. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t wish for a day when they feel better and their pain is treated and goes away!

In order to understand when things have gone wrong and might be causing pain (and thus need our help!), first we have to understand normal. Puppy teeth start to develop inside the jaw bone. The first set of teeth erupt starting about 3-6 weeks old in most animals. By 8 weeks old, most puppies and kittens have all of their baby teeth in place (deciduous teeth, or “milk teeth”). Puppies have 28 teeth, and kittens have 26.

The roots of the deciduous teeth begin to break down and resorb around 4 months of age, and when the root is completely gone, the baby tooth falls out. Usually the puppy or kitten swallows it while they are eating, although occasionally some owners find baby teeth around the house. By 6 months of age, all of the permanent (adult) teeth should be erupting or almost completely in place. Normal dogs will have 42 permanent teeth, and cats have 30.

As young animals come into the veterinary hospital for their well puppy and kitten visits each month, make a habit of examining the oral cavity each time. This offers several advantages:

1. The animal gets in the habit of allowing an oral exam
2. The owner understands the importance of regular oral exams
3. Discussion about tooth brushing, proper oral hygiene, and lifelong oral health can be started
4. Evaluation for and identification of problems can occur early

What types of problems are we watching puppies and kittens for?

1. Malocclusions – this is any type of abnormal tooth-on-tooth or tooth-on-soft tissue contact. This can occur with puppy teeth, and it can occur with adult teeth. Some cases don’t require intervention, but unfortunately, most do. This can be anything from extraction of the misplaced puppy teeth, to puppy braces. Yep, braces for dogs!
2. Fractured teeth – puppy and kitten teeth are very small, thin and fragile. And they can be hard on their young teeth. If a baby tooth fractures, it will allow infection down into the area where the adult tooth is developing and cause permanent damage to the adult
tooth. As soon as a broken baby tooth is identified, removal is recommended, even if it is expected to fall out very soon!

3. Missing teeth – As the permanent teeth erupt, counting them for the presence of all teeth is very important. If they are missing teeth by the age of 6 months, dental radiographs of the area should be obtained. If the teeth are truly missing, that is not a major problem unless the animal is expected to be used for show or breeding. But if they are impacted under the gumline or inside the bone, this can cause major problems. These impacted teeth should be identified and treated.
   a. Delayed eruption – This is when a tooth is trying to erupt, but gets stuck underneath a very thick layer of fibrous gum tissue. If identified in time, the gum tissue can be trimmed over the tooth and the tooth can be allowed to erupt normally. This is called an operculectomy. If the tooth is not angled correctly for eruption, or was not identified until the root closed and is no longer erupting, then removal of the tooth is necessary.
   b. Dentigerous cyst – This is caused by an impacted tooth that remains inside the bone. Fluid can accumulate around an impacted tooth, causing a very large and destructive cyst to form within the bone. This can damage the surrounding teeth, and left untreated, can even fracture the jaw. It will take a significant amount of bone damage to be able to visibly see the problem in the awake patient. Therefore, it is very important that any missing teeth are radiographed early to avoid this major problem.

4. Retained deciduous teeth – Another problem in slightly young animals is when the adult teeth come in, but the baby teeth did not fall out. A good rule is that no two teeth of the same type should be in the same mouth at the same time. If so, the baby tooth should be removed as soon as this problem is noted. If not, problems can occur from the crowding of these teeth, including malocclusions, periodontal disease, and pain!

5. Enamel hypocalcification - Weeks to months after the adult teeth erupt, the enamel can start to flake off and the teeth appear to be rough and irregular. This is called enamel hypocalcification. This is caused by injury to the tooth as it was developing inside the jaw bone, typically from a fever or from a traumatic injury to the jaw. As the enamel flakes away, this exposes the sensitive dentin, and can allow bacteria inside the tooth. Treatment involves radiographs to make sure that the teeth are still healthy and developed normally, then removing the unhealthy enamel and fillings (restorations) to prevent or treat sensitivity, pain, and infection. Extraction is sometimes necessary.

6. Tumors – yes, sadly, puppies can get tumors too. Typically these are rapidly growing, and can occur as young as 8-12 weeks. The most common tumors in young animals are papillary squamous cell carcinomas and odontomas. Most of the time, if caught early, these tumors can be completely removed and the dog can live a normal life. However, they grow very rapidly and can expand beyond the point of being able to surgically remove them very quickly. Early identification as a tumor rather than a facial swelling from an infection or other cause is extremely important for long term success.

Most puppies and kittens go about their childhood with very normal, healthy mouths, develop all of their teeth correctly, and do not have dental or oral health problems until they get older. However, when they do have problems, early detection and treatment can prevent pain and trauma, and can even save an animal’s life. Knowing what normal looks like helps identify abnormal, and immediate intervention is always best. Technicians are the first, and sometimes only, line of defense against puppy and kitten dental health problems.