



As seen in *Pawnation*

## [Keeping Your Cat's Teeth Clean and Healthy](#)

by [Jeanne Sager](#)

They need them to eat, to protect themselves, yet for seven out of ten cats, teeth troubles begin by the time they are three.

The key to healthy feline teeth is regular at home and professional cleaning but many well-meaning pet owners don't know how important this is. And it's not completely their fault. "Most veterinarians don't address dental health in cats," says Dr. Michel Selmer, veterinarian at [Advanced Animal Care Center](#) in Huntington Station, N.Y. A vocal advocate for the importance of dental health in pets, Selmer devotes 20 percent of his practice to oral issues.

In honor of [Pet Dental Health Month](#) -- and for the sake of 70 percent of American kitties -- Paw Nation asked Selmer for tips on how to keep your cat's mouth in good shape.

The process starts when they're kittens, with pet owners using a finger cot or gauze and toothpaste made specifically for them. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) recommends [dipping your finger in tuna water](#) before rubbing it on your kitty's gums to make the experience more pleasant. If you're uncomfortable, or you have just adopted an older cat who won't stomach your finger in his mouth, a once-yearly cleaning at the vet's office is recommended by the AVMA, beginning after a cat turns two.

Steer clear of the hard treats advertised to clean cats' teeth, Selmer advises. Although chewing on them can help break tartar from the teeth, the chunks that break off can represent a choking hazard.

Just like human babies, cats will lose their first set of teeth, a process that usually begins around 3 months. "Usually you won't even notice they're losing them," Selmer tells Paw Nation. Whether the teeth are swallowed or fall out on the floor, it's a normal occurrence -- and choking is not a concern.

What isn't normal, he says, is an adult cat losing a tooth. "After their baby teeth are gone,

there is no reason an adult cat should lose a tooth," he explains. "But cats get periodontal disease, which leads to inflammation and infection of the gum, and that can lead to the tooth rotting and falling out." The tooth itself is a concern, but Selmer says owners should be most worried because periodontal disease in cats can affect the heart, liver and kidneys, much as it does in humans.

"If a tooth falls out, the first thing you should worry about is why," Selmer says. "It is an indication that something is abnormal here." It's up to your veterinarian to determine whether the tooth fell out because of disease or was broken and knocked out via trauma (such as a fight).

Some signs that periodontal disease is the cause include yellow and brown tartar buildup along the gum line, red inflamed gums, and persistent bad breath. Cats are also prone to [resorptive lesions](#), a progressive and painful disease that will slowly break down the tooth structure.

Your vet can determine whether your cat needs oral surgery (if there are tooth fragments left behind) or a course of antibiotics. If disease is the cause of a missing tooth, Selmer says you need to talk to your vet about how to get your cat's health back to normal. That includes instituting a dental regimen at home and with your vet.