



## Blue Cross Animal Hospital

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## Retained Teeth in Cats

### How many teeth do cats have?

Like humans, cats have two sets of teeth in their lives, the deciduous teeth (also known as primary teeth, baby teeth, milk teeth, or kitten teeth) and the permanent teeth (also known as adult teeth).

### When do kittens get their deciduous teeth?

Kittens are born without any teeth. The deciduous or primary teeth start erupting through the gums at about three weeks of age, and are finished erupting by six weeks of age. The kitten will have 26 primary teeth in all.

A healthy mouth depends on healthy teeth. The ideal time to begin brushing a kitten's teeth is when you first get your pet, before the discomfort of teething starts. As your veterinary health care team, we can offer help and advice on the best products and methods of dental care for your individual kitten.



### When do kittens get their permanent teeth?

"Teething" begins in kittens at about 3 to 3 ½ months of age, when the primary incisors begin to be replaced by permanent incisors. In kittens, the entire teething process is relatively rapid, and by the time the average kitten reaches 6 to 7 months of age, all 30 adult teeth have erupted. Of a cat's 30 adult teeth, 10 have two roots each, 2 have three roots each, and 18 have one root each.

### What happens during teething?

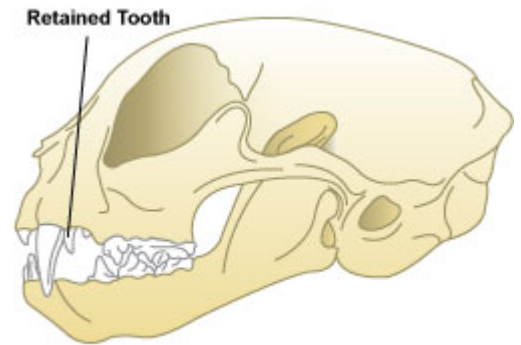
Long before the adult teeth erupt through the gums, they begin developing from "tooth buds" located in the upper and lower jaws. As the adult teeth develop and get bigger, they begin to press against the roots of the primary teeth, stimulating the kitten's body to begin absorbing (also called 'resorbing') the primary tooth roots. The primary tooth roots weaken and finally disappear, leaving only the crowns behind. As the adult teeth push through the gums, the crowns of the baby teeth fall out. Sometimes you may find these hollow shells of teeth on the floor or the kitten's bedding, but more often than not the teeth will fall out while the kitten is eating and it will swallow them with the rest of their food.

During this teething process, your kitten may drool, may be reluctant to eat at times, or may be irritable due to a tender mouth. Some kittens will begin to bite or chew incessantly when they are teething. It is important that you do what you can to direct your kitten's chewing towards acceptable objects and don't allow ANY chewing of people's fingers or toes. Provide your kitten with safe soft toys designed for kittens. Some kittens will chew on rawhide strips and these may provide some relief from the discomfort. During this time, you may notice a characteristic breath odor that is called 'kitten breath' and is associated with teething. This normal odor will last as long as the kitten is teething.

## What is a retained tooth?

A retained tooth is a deciduous or baby tooth that is still present in the mouth after its replacement permanent or adult tooth has erupted.

This usually occurs because something went wrong with the process of root resorption, so that the tooth root is either incompletely absorbed or does not resorb at all. When this happens, the baby tooth occupies the place in the mouth that is meant for the permanent tooth, forcing the permanent tooth to erupt at an abnormal angle or in an abnormal position. The end result is crowding or malocclusion of the teeth, causing an abnormal bite.



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## Which deciduous teeth are more commonly retained?

The most common teeth to be retained are the upper canine teeth, followed by the lower canine teeth and the incisors. However, in some cases, the premolar teeth may also be retained.

It is more common to see retained teeth in cats that have a brachycephalic conformation ("brachy" means "shortened" and "cephalic" means "head") like Persians and Himalayans. There may be a genetic predisposition to developing retained primary teeth since it often appears to occur in families of cats.

## What problems are caused by retained teeth?

If both a primary tooth and a permanent tooth are in the same spot in the jaw, the crowding of the two teeth will increase the likelihood that food and debris will become trapped between the teeth. This can lead to problems such as tartar deposits, tooth decay, gingivitis and periodontitis, all of which can lead to premature loss of teeth. If the root of the retained tooth has been only partly absorbed, it can become abscessed.

If the teeth are misaligned, they can rub against other teeth, wearing away the enamel and weakening the affected teeth. A retained deciduous tooth can also interfere with the normal growth and development of the jaw bones.

If the retained tooth is a lower canine, the permanent lower canine is forced to grow on the inside of the lower jaw and its tip will grow towards the roof of the mouth, causing pain and damage to the roof of the mouth and making it difficult for the pet to eat.

## When and how are retained teeth treated?

If you notice a retained tooth in your kitten's mouth, make an immediate appointment to have your veterinarian examine the tooth. Your veterinarian will be able to determine whether the tooth should be extracted immediately. Immediate extraction is necessary if the tooth is causing an alignment problem with the other teeth, is preventing the proper growth of the jaws, or is beginning to grow into the roof of the mouth. Early extraction in these cases will usually allow the adult teeth to move into their proper positions. In some cases, it may be reasonable to delay the extraction until the time of the spay or neuter surgery, since extraction of the retained tooth will require a general anesthesia. If your pet is not scheduled to be spayed or neutered, it is important to remove any retained teeth before dental problems set in.

Your veterinarian will take special care during the extraction of any retained tooth to avoid damaging the immature roots of the new permanent tooth.

## What happens if there is a delay before the retained tooth is extracted?

If the retained primary tooth is not extracted in a timely manner, it is unlikely that the adult teeth will be able to move into their proper positions without orthodontic treatment. In these cases, or for kittens with severe malocclusion problems, it may be necessary to selectively extract other teeth or to refer the pet to a veterinary dental specialist for orthodontic treatment to reposition the teeth.

## Is there anything else I should know?

In addition to regular tooth brushing, it is important to check your kitten's mouth every week until about six to seven months of age to ensure that the teeth are growing normally. If you find any retained teeth, or if you suspect your kitten has an abnormal bite, bring it in to the veterinary clinic for an oral examination immediately.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Cheryl Yuill, DVM, MSc, CVH  
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