

Cheshire Grins!

Proper dental care is crucial to your cat's health. Learn how to care for your pet's teeth.

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Teeth affected by lesions eventually disappear, absorbed back into the body, Lyon says. As resorption progresses, the tooth's root structure is broken down, the enamel and the bulk of the tooth are destroyed, the tooth is replaced in its socket by bone and the crown falls away. In the early stages, these teeth can be temporarily treated, possibly with fillings, but they will continue to deteriorate.

"It will even eat the whole tooth away," DuPont says.

The problem, first noted in the 1920s, is becoming more common, says Lyon, who estimates he sees FORL in half his clients. "But we're not sure what causes it," he says.

You can try various methods of keeping your cat's teeth clean to avoid these scenarios, veterinarians say. Some breeds are more prone to tooth problems and need extra attention.

Brush your cat's teeth several times weekly, ideally every day. Introduce the procedure gradually, letting your cat smell the toothpaste and brush before you use them. Keep the sessions short and sweet, rewarding your cat with praise and stroking. You don't have to open its mouth completely, Lyon says; lift its lip and work on the upper outside teeth, one side at a time. Use toothpaste designed for cats, as the human kind can upset cats' stomachs.

Not all cats tolerate tooth brushing as well as DuPont's own Abyssinian, Uno, who loves to have her teeth brushed. Don't push your cat if it resists the idea. You'll end up bitten or scratched. Alternatives, such as fish- or chicken-flavored tartar control treats and cylinders shaped like mice bodies, can wipe plaque off teeth as they're chewed. You can also use gauze to clean teeth.

You can place other topical products, such as gels and liquids, in your cat's mouth. A number of tartar-control foods are on the market. Ask your veterinarian which product best suits your cat's needs.

Janis and Steve Clark of Highlands Ranch, Colo., developed an unusual approach to their cats' dental care. Eight-year-old Rascal started having his teeth brushed when he was a kitten. "It was pretty easy," Janis Clark says. "He was so young."

Their 6-year-old female, Cactus, on the other hand, barely tolerates the procedure. Cactus needs diligent home oral care because she developed inflamed gums and a tooth that looked as though it might have to be extracted 1½ years ago.