Fun Facts About Animal Teeth

Teeth are important for both humans and animals! We use our teeth to eat, speak and show that we are happy. Animals can use their teeth not only to eat, but also to groom themselves, carry their young, defend themselves, and build their homes! Here are some interesting facts about animals and their very important teeth:

**BIRDS**

Do birds have teeth? Well... not really. But this species of toucan called a Collared Aracari (pictured, top) sure looks like he does! Toucans and other species of birds like the Gray Goose have serrations (jagged edges) on their beaks that help them grip their prey. These aren’t really like the teeth that mammals have—they’re more like the “teeth” on a saw or a comb.

Some birds, like the King Penguin, (pictured above, right) have spine-covered tongues and upper palates* that hold wiggly fish in place. Unlike our teeth, the spines are pointed backward and work like barbs to keep food going in the right direction—down their throats!—since most birds swallow their food whole.

*Your upper palate (the roof of your mouth) is smooth and made of soft tissue. Did you know the skin on your palate and tongue can be a hiding place for germs? It’s important to brush your tongue and use mouthwash or swish with water after brushing to make sure your entire mouth is clean!

Baby birds can also have tiny barbs in their mouths (like these baby Cardinals, bottom) and most have an “egg tooth” at the tip of their beaks to help them crack their shells when they are born!

Birds of prey, like the Common Kestrel Falcon (above, right), may have a sharp “tomial tooth” to sever their prey’s vertebrae. These aren’t really like our teeth since they’re not coated in enamel.

**What about snails? Do they have teeth?**
Snails may look soft and squishy but, believe it or not, they can have up to 14,000 teeth! (That means it takes them 5 1/2 hours to floss every day!) Snails and slugs have bands of microscopic teeth called radula that tear away at their food.

**ELEPHANTS**

Elephant tusks are modified incisors* that replace milk teeth when the baby elephant is between 6 and 12 months old. After this, their tusks grow about 6 1/2 inches each year! African elephants have tusks in both males and females, but in Asian elephants, only the males have large tusks while the females have very small ones or no tusks at all. Tusks are used for defense, digging for food and water, and carrying and lifting.

Unlike humans, whose teeth are pushed up through the gums, an elephant’s teeth are developed from the back and push forward. An elephant has six sets of molars during their lifetime. As each tooth wears out through grinding, another tooth moves forward to replace it. A single elephant molar can weigh up to five pounds! In captivity, mature elephants are trained to open wide so their keepers can keep their teeth healthy since an elephant with unhealthy or missing teeth will starve to death.

**DOGS**

Puppies lose their baby or milk teeth over a matter of weeks—not years like human kids. Puppies have about 28 teeth that fall out by the time they’re about six months old to make room for 42 adult teeth. That’s 10 more teeth than people have!

A dog’s teeth are like human teeth in that they have layers: pulp in the middle, surrounded by dentin and coated in hard enamel (the white part of your teeth that you can see.) But dog teeth and people teeth are not shaped the same. Our molars are designed to grind against each other to smash up our food. But a dog’s large, upper premolars and lower molars work together like scissors to slice food apart.

Dogs don’t usually get cavities because the bacteria that cause cavities in human mouths (that love to feed on sugar!) don’t typically live in dogs’ mouths. When dogs do get cavities, it’s usually from eating sweet treats like bananas or sweet potatoes.

*Your incisors are the teeth at the front of your mouth, four on top and four on the bottom, that are used for biting through crunchy apples and carrots!
You need to take care of your dog’s teeth. They can get gum disease, which can lead to tooth loss (just like in people!) Look for plaque build-up on their teeth and brush it away with a toothbrush and toothpaste made especially for dogs! Dog dental treats or chews can also help keep your dog’s teeth healthy.

CATS
These soft cuties also have interesting teeth! By about 4 months old, kittens have already replaced their baby teeth with 30 adult teeth! Since cats are carnivores (meat-eaters), they only have pointy and serrated teeth to clean meat off bones. Their front incisors are mainly used for grooming their fur, not eating.

Cats get cavities too—and they hurt as much as human cavities. They usually start below the gum line, so it’s important to get regular check-ups at the vet. You may need to brush your cat’s teeth to keep them healthy!

RABBITS & SQUIRRELS
These adorable, fuzzy cuties are herbivores, so they don’t have canine teeth. Instead, they have six incisors in the front that work like scissors to cut up grass, and 22 molars in the back that grind up food.

Unlike people, rabbit teeth are not protected by enamel and wear down easily. As a result, their teeth are continually growing. They can grow 3-5 inches each year! If a bunny isn’t fed the right amount of fibrous foods like grass and hay, their teeth can grow too long and cause major oral health problems that make it difficult to eat (just like the bunny in the top photo.)

Squirrels have four front teeth that, like rabbits and other rodents, continue to grow for their whole life. This keeps their teeth from wearing out as they gnaw on nuts, pine cones and bark. Sometimes the front teeth of a wild squirrel will not line up like they should. They will keep growing until the squirrel cannot eat anymore and the squirrel starves to death.

When our teeth don’t line up the way they should it can be difficult to take care of them, chew, or speak properly. Luckily, unlike squirrels, people can go to an orthodontist to get braces!
ALLIGATORS AND CROCODILES

An adult alligator has between 74 and 84 teeth in its mouth. Alligator teeth aren't very sharp so they have to bite down very hard to make up for it. If an alligator loses a tooth, a new one will take its place—producing up to 3,000 teeth in a lifetime!

Crocodiles (like the one shown above) have between 60-110 teeth—and they’re very sharp! Crocs use their sharp teeth to tear apart flesh and swallow large chunks. A crocodile can replace each of its teeth up to 50 times and can go through 4,000 teeth in its lifetime. (That’s A LOT of visits from The Tooth Fairy!)

Crocodiles can’t sweat so, they open their mouths wide to exhale heat, similar to the way a dog pants to cool down. When the Nile Crocodile does this, a small bird called a Plover bird flies inside the croc’s mouth to eat the bits of meat lodged around and between its teeth. The Plover gets a free meal and the croc gets a dental cleaning!

Since Plover birds don’t clean human teeth, you’ll need to brush yours two times for two minutes every day. Be sure to visit your dental office two times every year too. The dental hygienist will give your teeth an extra good cleaning and make sure your gums are healthy too!

The Nile Crocodile has been measured to have the most powerful bite in the world—exerting up to 5,000 pounds of pressure per square inch. This is 10 times more pressure than the feared great white shark!

SNAKES

All snakes have teeth, but only venomous snakes have fangs to inject venom into their prey. These fangs (shown, right) work like the hollow hypodermic needles used to give shots at the doctor’s office.

Not all venomous snakes are deadly. This parrot snake (above, top) has venom that causes pain near the bite and swelling that goes away after only a few hours.

I’M DONE CLEANING YOUR TEETH, BUT IT’S BEEN A WHILE SINCE YOUR LAST X-RAY.
COWS
Cows have no upper front teeth. To chew they press their bottom teeth against their hard palate. They eat for about 8 hours a day!

Did you know the cheese we make from cow's milk helps protect our teeth from harmful acid and causes more cleansing saliva for fewer cavities? It's true!

SHARKS
Baby sharks are born with a complete set of teeth, which means they should visit the shark dentist right away! Baby humans should visit the dentist as soon as their first teeth emerge or by their first birthday (whichever comes first!)

Each type of shark has a different shaped tooth depending on what they eat. Shark teeth don't have roots like our teeth do, so they fall out easily while the shark is eating. On average, sharks lose about one tooth per week. However, because sharks grow teeth much like a conveyor belt in rows, each tooth can be replaced within a day! Most sharks have 5-15 rows of teeth, except for the most dangerous shark in the world—the Bull Shark can have up to 50 rows. Yikes!

Sharks never run out of teeth. A shark may grow as many as 20,000 over its lifetime!

Shark teeth are covered in fluoride, the same ingredient in toothpaste that helps to keep teeth strong, making them naturally resistant to cavities. (Your teeth aren't! So be sure to brush with fluoride toothpaste two times every day.)

The upper jaw of the white shark is able to come unhinged from the skull and move forward!

We hope you found these facts about animal teeth as fascinating as we did! Remember—just like animals need teeth to survive in the wild, you need to take care of your teeth to be healthy and to be able to eat healthy foods. Remember to brush two times for two minutes every day. Floss between your teeth every day and rinse with water or mouthwash to clean the soft parts of your mouth too!

Want more great oral health tips and resources? Get a smile in your inbox! Sign up for one of our fun and informative, quarterly newsletters at AmericasToothFairy.org.

Teeth from a Tiger Shark, Great White Shark, Bull, Mako and Oceanic Whitetip