

Your cat's mouth & teeth

You've probably felt your cat's sandpaper-like tongue on occasion, but getting a good look at his mouth and teeth takes a little more effort. So gather your furry friend in close, gently open his mouth, and take a closer look at these critical parts of your cat:

The gums

Lift up your cat's lips and take a look at the gums. They should be pink, not shades of red, white, yellow, or blue. Some cats have dark pigment spots on their gums and tongue. Don't panic—that's normal.

If your cat's gums look red and swollen, that's the first sign of periodontal disease, a serious condition you'll want your veterinarian to address right away. As the condition worsens, your pet's gums will recede, and without treatment his teeth will eventually loosen and fall out. The key: Catch the condition early and take action.

The teeth

Next, look at the teeth. They should be white, clean, and smooth and should not be broken, cracked, or pitted. Cats can develop pit-like areas in the teeth near the gum line—they're similar to cavities in people and can be quite painful. If you think a tooth may be cracked or pitted, take your cat to the veterinarian.

He or she will examine your cat's teeth and may take X-rays to determine the extent of the damage. Depending on the results, your veterinarian may choose to pull the tooth, restore it, or refer your pet to a veterinary dental specialist.

Just like people, cats accumulate tartar at different rates. If your pet's teeth have lost their pearly shine, your veterinarian can take care of the problem with a professional cleaning. He or she also can tell you how often your pet's teeth need to be cleaned. Some pets may need their teeth cleaned every six months, while others can go a few years between cleanings.

Part of the difference depends on the characteristics of your cat. However, you can control some factors that affect tartar buildup.



For example, pets who eat dry food accumulate less tartar than pets who eat moist or canned food. You can also make a difference by brushing your cat's teeth at home. And if you're not up to that, you can still give your pet special treats that help control tartar. Your veterinarian can recommend specific products.

A note on cat breath

Your cat's breath may not smell sweet, but it shouldn't make you flee the room. And foul odor in the mouth can indicate dental disease. Excessive drooling and lumps in your cat's mouth aren't normal either. Alert your veterinarian if you notice any of these problems.