



LET'S TALK ABOUT

DENTAL CARE

AN APH CARE GUIDE

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DENTAL CARE

As African Pygmy Hedgehogs become more popular as pets, it is important to know how to properly take care of them, including how to provide the dental care they need. African Pygmy hedgehogs are prone to oral conditions. They are often afflicted with tooth and gum disease. This guide explains how you can help your hog's oral health and even touches on brushing your hog's teeth (yes really !)

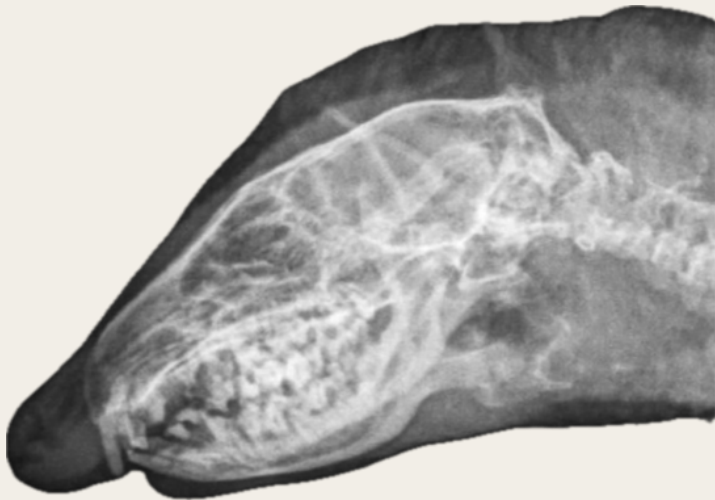
A hoglet usually begins cutting their baby teeth within 18 to 23 days after they're born. Milk teeth are another name for baby teeth. By the time a hoglet is 7 to 9 weeks old, their baby teeth should be completely broken through and their adult teeth starting to grow. As the teeth are so small most people do not notice that the baby teeth fall out and get replaced with permanent teeth.

An adult hedgehog will typically have between 36 to 44 permanent teeth. Their teeth, much like humans, consist of incisors, canines, premolars, and molars.



Hedgehogs are omnivorous with very well-developed jaws and short and relatively coarse teeth with a primitive structure. The skull is low with well-developed zygomatic arches. The incisors are sharp, modified forceps that are needed for elevation of small prey. The canines are small and often look like incisors or premolars. The molars and premolars are flat and wide. The teeth have closed root canals and grow for a limited time.

Most dental issues are caused by a build up of tartar and plaque. The tartar and plaque that usually builds up in a hedgehog's mouth when not taken care of well are caused by bacteria, a combination of saliva and food particles. These bacteria and other components sit along the gum lines which are a direct pathway to the hedgehog's blood supply, allowing the bacteria to be dispersed throughout the body organs. This process can lead to systemic infection if left unattended. Sounds serious, right?



So what does plaque look like and how can you prevent it occurring in your hedgehog's mouth? Plaque, tartar, and calculus are what your veterinarian might call the black or brown stuff on your hedgehog's teeth. You can usually brush off the softer plaque, but usually, tartar and calculus are too hard to brush off without a professional cleaning. Unfortunately, a vet would need to anaesthetise a hog to remove plaque build up, and since anaesthesia is dangerous for small animals, plaque prevention is definitely better in the long term.

Naturally, the tough exoskeletons of insects that hedgehogs eat are filled with fibers that help them clean their teeth organically. However, when they are kept as pets, they still need their teeth checked, as they may not be consuming the exact amount of insects, or the correct type of insect, that can effectively clean their teeth. This causes tartar and plaque build-up for most hedgehogs, which then can cause more serious dental conditions and loss of teeth.

Often there are at least two tell-tale signs that a hedgehog may be experiencing dental issues. First, your hedgehog may have difficulty chewing or they may totally avoid chewing since their mouth hurts. Second, your hog may have swelling along the jaw line, gums, lips, chin, or upper snout area. Some other signs that may indicate teeth issues are bad breath (halitosis), drooling, weight loss, pawing at their mouth, rubbing their jaw up against things or along the ground, and signs of blood around their mouth. If you see one or more of these signs, we strongly suggest that you have them seen by a qualified veterinarian as soon as possible.

Examining the inside of your hedgehog's mouth to assess the healthiness of their teeth puts you well ahead of any surprise oral issues. You can do this by using an ice lolly stick to help lift the mouth so that you can inspect the gum line. By the time an abscessed tooth causes a lump visible on the outside of their mouth, the infection is rather advanced. By performing periodic checks inside your hedgehog's mouth, you will become aware of any plaque and tartar build-up before it becomes a problem leading to infection. If plaque and tartar builds up, it can lead to gingivitis. Gingivitis is a type of periodontal disease, but it does not cause the tooth loss. Periodontitis is the culprit that causes tooth loss and this is caused when gingivitis advances untreated.

There is another cause of tooth loss, however it is often untreatable. When a hedgehog has abnormal cell growth in their mouth, called neoplasms, they are often cancerous. Whenever cancer is found in a hedgehog's oral cavity, it's typically an aggressive squamous cell carcinoma.

Hedgehogs may also experience tooth fractures and dental abscesses. A tooth root abscess is when the root of the tooth, which you cannot see without x-rays on a healthy tooth, has a pocket of pus surrounding it in your hedgehog's mouth. This is due to a bad tooth infection and may sometimes cause a bump under your hedgehog's eye on the side of the face where the bad tooth is. This bump may look like a small spot and may pop up pretty quickly. If you see a bump like this, or any lump on your hedgehog, get them to see the veterinarian as soon as possible. The bad tooth will need to be extracted, the rest of the teeth cleaned, and your little hedgehog needs some serious pain medications and antibiotics.

Symptoms of Hedgehog Dental Disease to look out for :

- Excessive foamy saliva that smells
- Pawing at the mouth
- Tartar build-up
- Crusty tooth stains
- Gum inflammation
- Recession of gum line
- Bald spot on the face with inflammation
- Coughing
- Nasal discharge
- Loose teeth
- Poor appetite

PLAQUE PREVENTION

If your hedgehog is young and their teeth are healthy, they should be eating up to a tablespoon of crunchy cat kibble a night (see other food guides for recommended kibble). The crunchiness helps reduce plaque and tartar build-up, so while they are eating, they are increasing their oral hygiene. However, please be aware that if their kibble is too hard it can be detrimental to their teeth, causing tooth breakage. The easiest way to test if kibble is too tough is to squeeze a piece of it between your finger and thumb, if you struggle to crumble it then so will your hog's teeth.

It has recently become more popular to feed pet hedgehogs raw pet grade food. Whilst this may be closer to a wild diet, the food is too soft on its own and causes more dental issues. If you are feeding a raw diet then it is recommended to continue offering kibble and insects daily as well. Remember, in the wild they are crunching on beetles and egg shells, they need something in their diet to prevent plaque build up.

There will be times when it is appropriate to feed your hedgehog soft cat food. If they already have lost several teeth, crunchy kibble will hurt their gums. In that case, vets will often suggest switching to a soft cat food. There are a lot more suitable options than feeding them wet cat food if they become gummy. Blending bugs, suitable baby foods, crushing or soaking/ softening their biscuits with hot water are great alternatives. Wet cat food alone would not give them the nutrients they need. If you do feed wet cat food please provide it in jelly, not in gravy, as gravy wet food causes diarrhoea and dehydration. A recommended wet food is Royal Canin - First Age Mother & Babycat Mousse. Please note, hogs that do lose teeth can actually do quite well and still manage many of their favourite and healthy foods.

Do not use metal drip water bottles (like those used for hamsters/rabbits). Not only can hedgeghogs crack their teeth on them, they can also injure their protruding eyes and these bottles have been known to shred their tongues. Avoid using metal drip water bottles.

Consider brushing your hedgehog's teeth. Yes, we know, it is hard enough to cut their nails, let alone put your fingers next to their mouth, it is asking for chomp chomp time.

While it may seem bizarre to hear, you can clean your hedgehog's teeth. There are even some video's on the internet showing Pygmy hedgehog's getting their teeth cleaned. Please do not use human toothpaste because it cannot be swallowed, not to mention it would not taste nice to a hedgehog. Try using a chicken flavoured pet toothpaste. A micro head toothbrush is great for getting into the nooks and crannies of their small mouths. They also have a long handle so your fingers are a bit further way! Other suggested brushes are silicon ear buds (like cotton buds), these are reusable and the silicon is soft on the gums. Any one of these toothbrushes will make brushing your hedgehog's teeth easier. There are definitely a lot of hogs out there that teeth cleaning would be a total no go, and remember kibble is often enough to keep their teeth clean. It is all a matter of personal preference and what works best for you and your hedgehog.

Whether you decide to brush your hedgehog's teeth or not, it is clear that prevention is definitely better than the cure for our spikey friends. Keep a close eye on their teeth and gums, always offer kibble and insects to aid tartar and plaque prevention. Remember that hogs hide pain well, so keep an eye out for any strange new behaviour and be mindful of the symptoms above.

