



Montrose Pet Hospital

2444 Honolulu Ave, Montrose, CA, 91020

Phone: (818) 249-2273

Fax: 818-435-8182

Email: info@montrosepethospital.com

Website: www.montrosepethospital.com

Teeth, Teething and Chewing in Puppies

My puppy has started biting my hands, my legs, my children's legs—pretty much any object he can get his mouth on. What is going on?

Your puppy is teething, the same way that human babies and children grow new teeth during their development. Like a human, your pup first grows a set of baby teeth (also called primary or deciduous, meaning they fall out). These teeth are pointed and sharp, which is why they're sometimes referred to as needle teeth. Dogs have 28 deciduous teeth and end up with 42 permanent teeth. You may find baby teeth on the floor, but it's more likely that you won't. Often, puppies harmlessly swallow the teeth while they're eating. It is not unusual for some bleeding to occur when the teeth fall or are falling out, but the amount is minuscule and owners usually notice it only if there is some mild red staining on a chew toy.



Why is everything being attacked?

Puppies will chew on people, furniture, and other objects (including ones you value) that are within their reach; this is part of normal puppy behavior. Dogs learn much about the world around them through how things feel, and a dog's main means of touching and grabbing things is with its mouth.

Dogs learn much about the world around them through their mouths.

This tendency is particularly pronounced in breeds known to be “mouthy,” such as retrievers. Chewing also seems to alleviate what is assumed to be discomfort associated with the teething process.

When will my dog's baby teeth fall out?

Puppies begin teething at around 3 weeks, and by approximately 6 weeks, all of their baby teeth will have erupted. The incisors (at the front of the mouth) and the canine teeth (the fangs) erupt first, followed by the premolars. Dogs (and cats, for that matter) do not have any baby molars. At around 12 weeks, the deciduous teeth begin to fall out, and the permanent teeth begin to erupt. By 6 months of age, normally all permanent teeth have erupted and all deciduous teeth are out.

Are there any common dental problems in young dogs?

Problems with baby teeth are few and far between. It is rare that a pup will have a dental problem that is serious enough to require advanced intervention or referral to a veterinary dentist. Some breeds, particularly smaller breeds and brachycephalic (short-nosed) breeds, have a tendency to retain some of their deciduous teeth. The most usual site is the

upper canine teeth, although it can happen anywhere. Retained baby teeth can cause malocclusion (a bad bite) and discomfort. They also predispose dogs to future dental problems. Food can get trapped between the deciduous teeth, the permanent teeth, and the gingiva (gums), which can lead to periodontal (dental) disease. Retained deciduous teeth need to be removed. Usually a simple procedure, it is commonly performed at the time of the pet's neutering or spaying.

What are acceptable chew toys, and which ones should be avoided?

Because dogs tend to chew nearly everything, nearly everything has been found to cause problems. This goes for rawhides, pigs' ears or other parts of animals given to dogs to chew (some owners swear by the "bully stick," which is the dried or cooked amputated penis of a bull), bones, synthetic toys, tennis balls, etc. Some of these objects have caused gastrointestinal blockages or intestinal punctures, which often require surgery and can be life-threatening; others have blocked the throat, causing dogs to asphyxiate.

Notwithstanding these facts, consider that millions of dogs have been chewing millions of objects for years, most without incident. So the risk does appear to be low, but as with most activities, it cannot be eliminated. Watch your dog when he begins chewing, and talk to your veterinarian about which chew toys are the safest bets for your puppy.

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Bear in mind that some objects that are safe from the point of view of ingestion or inhalation may still not be very good for your dog's teeth. Most veterinary dentists recommend against allowing puppies and older dogs to chew anything hard. That would include objects made of nylon as well as "unbreakable" natural bones, such as marrow bones. Veterinary dentists often sum up this recommendation with the maxim, "Don't let your dog chew anything that won't bend" or "Avoid chew toys that you can't make a dent into with your fingernail."

What should I do about my puppy's chewing behaviors that I don't like?

Do not reward behavior you don't want, and don't let others reward it either. If your puppy is chewing on your hands or any other body part, yelp a high pitched shriek like a puppy makes, pull your hand away, and go play elsewhere.

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There is no consensus about the best way to teach puppies not to chew. Some methods may even seem contradictory because what may work for one dog may be inappropriate for another. Check with your veterinarian for a personalized recommendation.

My children like playing rough with the puppy, and they say that they don't mind the occasional scratch or gentle bite. Is this OK?

No! Permitting this behavior teaches your pet that hands are acceptable toys to use as he or she pleases. Your dog is not only learning that it is OK, but the pup is even being rewarded for this behavior when your children continue playing after being bitten or scratched.

Will my dog ever stop chewing everything?

Excessive chewing behavior seems to subside around 1-and-a-half years of age but will continue to some degree, depending on the dog, for his or her whole life. Remember that chewing, licking and mouthing are normal behaviors for dogs as a way of exploring and learning, and carrying objects from one place to the next. If chewing is excessive or aggressive, consult your veterinarian for behavior modification advice.

Should I brush my dog's teeth?



Getting your puppy used to having something in his or her mouth other than food or a chew toy is a good idea. You also want to be able to retrieve objects from your dog's mouth or look in there without risk of injury to your hand. In addition, because dental problems are among the most common (and costly) problems seen in dogs, getting your dog to tolerate brushing at an early age will get you started on a path that will help prevent many of these problems.

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Buy a toothbrush and toothpaste suitable for dogs (human toothpaste is not appropriate for dogs and can make them sick). Start by just gently introducing the brush and paste, allowing your pup to sniff and lick the brush. However, don't force the matter. Ask your veterinarian to demonstrate brushing technique and give you advice for getting your dog used to the routine. Most dogs can be taught to tolerate or even enjoy daily brushing. We will discuss this in more depth with you during future puppy visits or at the time of spaying/neutering.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Richard Lerner, DVM, MPH
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