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## Mouth care critical for cats

Cats are considered to be a discriminating species. They are picky in many aspects of their normal behaviors. They choose whom to be friendly with and



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THE CAT DOC

when they want to obey. They are "finicky" because of their feeding behavior. Does being finicky have to do with the taste of food, or is it merely a behavior designed to drive owners crazy?

Cats are carnivores. They are hunters and natural meat eaters. Their teeth are designed to tear rather than chew. The prominent fangs, called canine teeth, are shaped to kill small animals when they are bitten in the neck. In the wild, cats eat the bones and organs of their prey. This supplies them with vitamins and minerals.

The tongue of the cat is uniquely designed to detect tastes, temperature, and food texture. It can ladle liquids, pick up tiny bits of food, remove meat from bones, and groom the coat.

The sense of taste in cats

is probably more sensitive than our own. Some researchers believe that cats like to drink out of running spigots because they prefer fresher tasting water.

Taste and palatability are not the same thing. Palatability is crucial to a cat's decision to eat. Cats are sensitive to the taste, texture, and physical shape of their food.

Owners want to feed their cat something the pet really wants to eat. The problem with increased palatability is that it leads to obesity. Higher fat content is common in the more palatable foods.

Diseases and conditions that affect the tongue, teeth or gums alter normal functions. Changes in eating, drinking and grooming behaviors should alert cat owners to potential problems with their cat's mouth.

Bad breath, drooling, difficulty with eating, mouth pawing and jaw chattering are the clinical signs associated with oral diseases in cats. Dental diseases including abscessed or broken teeth, misaligned teeth and inflamed gums are the most common oral problems found in cats.

Drooling is not normal. Unlike slobbering canines, only a few cats drool when they are excited, nervous or

happy. If your cat is drooling, you should consult with your veterinarian.

A cat needs a healthy, pain-free mouth and a strong tongue to groom adequately. Some cats groom themselves, some groom other cats, and some even try to groom their owners!

Cats cry, meow and talk to other cats with their mouths.

Cats are quite adept at using their mouths to carry things. Queens use their mouths to transport and care for their kittens. Cats that are good hunters parade around with their prey in their mouths. Some cats will fetch objects and carry them back to their owners.

The mouth plays a role in numerous aspects of a cat's life. Oral health is crucial for a cat to eat, drink and groom properly. The cat mouth performs many of the duties that human hands do.

Bad breath, drooling and difficulty with eating are clues that point to potential oral disease.

By watching your cat's mouth, and seeking veterinary advice when problems are observed, you can help your cat stay healthy.

Dr. Elaine Wexler-Mitchell owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange, 714-282-2287.