

Say “Ahhh...”



Close-up view of the teeth and gums of “Celeste”, our 12 year-old female red panda.

Some species, like red pandas (see photo), seem particularly predisposed to periodontal disease, which can lead to dental infection. Some mammals, like rodents, rabbits, and horses, have teeth that grow throughout their whole lives, and if a tooth is not in the right position or if they aren't fed the right diet to keep the teeth worn down, they can have lifelong problems as a result.

Tooth injuries can result in fractures, and if a piece of the tooth breaks off, the pulp (which contains the blood vessels and the nerves) can be exposed, which is painful and puts the tooth at risk of infection. If that happens, then the choice must be

made whether to extract (pull) the tooth, or try to repair it. Often times, this is based on how important the tooth is to the animal and its lifestyle. For instance, if a small incisor (front tooth) broke, it is not essential for most animals, and so it would be pulled. One major exception would be an elephant, whose tusks are actually a type of incisor! If a large canine tooth or molar fractures on a tiger, however, then that tooth is repaired through a procedure called a root canal.

We are very lucky here at the zoo to have several dental professionals to assist us. Regular cleaning of the teeth is done by the veterinary technician with the animal under anesthesia during routine examination. As the zoo veterinarian, it my job to examine the teeth with tools (see photo) to make sure they are healthy, and pull them when that is needed. When a more complicated dental problem arises, there are veterinary and human dental specialists that are generous enough to offer us their time and expertise. Drs. Mark Wohlford and Krie Brasseale and their teams of dedicated dental professionals have helped with procedures such as the clouded leopard's root canals (see x-ray, with star indicating the completed root canal) and the male jaguar's canine tooth repair.

Almost all mammals have teeth (some exceptions include anteaters, like our Giant Anteater, “Mr. Pickles”, and pangolins, which are the [most highly trafficked animals in the world](#)). Taking care of those teeth is yet another important facet of the veterinary care of our animal residents at Mesker Park Zoo. February is National Pet Dental Health Month, so for more information about keeping animals' teeth healthy, [click here](#) and/or contact your family veterinarian.

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