



Wild Kids

Open Wide!

by Kelly Burns

Remember your last visit to the dentist? Were you sitting in a big moving chair, light brightly shining, the dentist peeking into your mouth to examine your teeth? A dentist checks to make sure your teeth are healthy. Each tooth has to be inspected since each one plays an important job in how you eat your food.

Your teeth are your body's eating tools. Now I know what you are thinking, "Aren't my fork, knife, and spoon my eating tools?" These tools help out before the food gets into your mouth. Your teeth take over after that. Animals, on the other hand, have to do all the work with their teeth.

Teeth can do amazing things, like tear, hold, grind and rip. These actions help get food into an animal's body so it can be passed on to the stomach for digestion. The type of preparation a piece of food must go through to be ready for the stomach depends on what food the animal is eating.

An animal eating grass or branches has to bite, hold and pull. The front teeth performing the bite are called incisors. Molars perform grinding and chewing; they are teeth with big flat surfaces. A plant-eating animal is called an herbivore.

If an animal has to catch another animal for food, it might need to hold the prey with long, pointed teeth and cut it with sharp-edged teeth. These pointed canine teeth are tools for holding or tearing meat. A meat-eating animal is called a carnivore.

Sometimes animals have pointy teeth for tearing, and flat teeth for grinding. These animals are omnivores and eat both plants and animals.

Teeth are important keys to learning about an animal. By examining the teeth of an animal you can determine what kind of "eater" it is.

Once you know what food an animal eats, you can guess how it finds its food. A carnivore must hunt animals or find dead animals in order to eat. As long as the right plants are available, herbivores can graze or browse to get food. So the next time you walk outside, think about the kind of animal you would need to be to survive in your habitat. ■

Be a dental detective:

Take a look in the mirror at your teeth and compare them to the diagram. Do you have canine teeth? Molars? Incisors? Based on what you found, what kind of an "eater" is a human?

Chew your food:

Think about how you eat each of the foods on this list. Do you bite from the front or side or use your back teeth?

- Carrot
- Corn on the cob
- Popcorn
- Chicken wing
- Apple
- Ice cream cone

Count them out:

Count how many teeth you have.

Guess how many teeth a wolf has.

What difference does it make how many teeth an animal has?

