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TEETH Z173/A

Teeth are found in the jaws of many vertebrates (animals with backbones). The primary function of teeth is to tear, scrape and chew food, although in some animals they are also used for fighting or defence. The teeth are embedded in jaws.

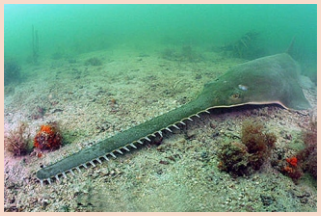
The shape of teeth is related to an animal's diet. The teeth of carnivores (meat eaters) have very narrow points or edges and no grinding surfaces. Omnivores (plant and animal eaters) have wedge - shaped front teeth (incisors) and rear teeth (premolars and molars) with broad grooves and crowned surfaces. Ungulates (hoofed animals) have wide molars with ridged patterns. Walruses and elephants have large tusks, which hang outside the mouth.

While humans develop two sets of teeth during their life, some animals develop only one set or many more than two. Some sharks, for example, grow a new set of teeth every two weeks! Teeth are not found in birds but modifications such as hooks, notches and serrations of their beaks serve to function as an alternative.

Sawfish saw, upper jaw

Sawfish are a family of marine animals related to sharks and rays. Their most striking appearance is a long toothy snout. Sawfish have been known to defend themselves with their saw against predators. The "teeth" protruding from the saw are not real teeth but modified scales.







Salmon lower jaw

Salmon are born in fresh water, migrate to the open ocean for one to five years, and return to their natal stream to spawn. The young salmon feed on very small animals and insects in fresh water and the oceans. When older, they eat other fish. Salmon have canine teeth. The male salmon develop a kype (hooked jaw).



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Musk rat half jaw





The musk rat front teeth (incisors), which can be up to two centimetres long, are especially adapted for underwater chewing. The incisors can protrude in front of the lips so that the musk rat can chew on stems and roots under water with mouth closed. Musk rats also use their sharp front teeth to fight attackers.





9 fox teeth

Foxes are mostly carnivores. Their teeth are used for tearing flesh and chewing. The canine teeth are long and pointed, and the back teeth are smaller but also pointed for cutting raw meat.

Tooth from necklace





Necklaces have been used as symbols of rank, leadership and power in traditional cultures. Now they are used as an ornament or a part of dress of both men and women. Necklaces are made from many materials such as beads, gold and teeth.

Canine tooth



In mammals, the canine teeth are also called dog teeth, fangs or eye teeth. They are pointed teeth and are often the longest teeth in a mammal's mouth.

Badger half jaw



The badger's lower jaw is attached to the upper jaw by a transverse condyle (bone spur) firmly locked into a long cavity of the skull. This enables the badger to maintain its hold, but limits the jaw movement to open and shut, or sliding from side to side.

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Horse tooth

An adult horse has six upper and six lower incisor teeth, adapted to biting grass or other vegetation, at the front of the mouth. They also have 24 premolar and molar teeth adapted for chewing at the back of the mouth.





Pig tusk - female

Pigs have a full set of 44 teeth. The canine teeth, called tusks, grow continually and are sharpened by the lowers and uppers rubbing against each other. Tusks are longer among males.



Hippopotamus tusk

The hippopotamus weighs up to 4.54 tons, is about 1.4 metres high at the shoulder and about 4 metres long. Hippos have a huge muzzle and mouth. The canine teeth are about 70 centimetres long and the enormous mouth can open 1.2 metres wide. Male hippos have larger tusks than females.





Cow tooth

A cow only has incisor teeth on the bottom jaw. The top of the jaw is a hard pad. Together they are perfect for grazing. The cow takes a mouthful of grass, then grinds it back and forth between the jaws until a ball called a "bolus" forms and is swallowed to the first of four stomachs.





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8 calf teeth

A calf is the young of various species of mammal. The term is most commonly used to refer to the young of cattle. These calf teeth belonged to a cow.





Sheep half jaw

A mature sheep has 32 teeth. There are six molars and six premolars, all paired in the upper and lower jaws. The eight incisors are all in the lower jaw, biting against a hard, toothless pad in the upper jaw. A new pair of incisors grows every year to 4 years. It is possible to distinguish the age of sheep by examining their front teeth.





African elephant tooth

Elephants are classified in to three species: the African Bush Elephant, the African Elephant and the Indian Elephant. Unlike most mammals, which grow baby teeth and then replace them with a permanent set of adult teeth, elephants have a cycle of tooth rotation throughout their entire life. After one year the tusks are permanent, but the molars are replaced six times in an average elephant's lifetime.

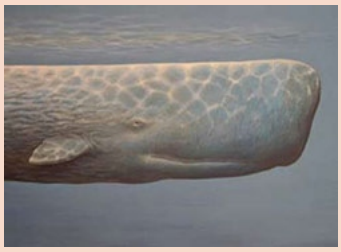




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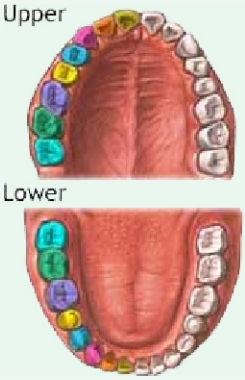
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Sperm whale tooth
Sperm whales are the largest toothed whales and the largest living carnivore. The teeth are 8 - 20 centimetres long. Each tooth can weigh as much as one kilogram.





4 human teeth
Humans, unlike most mammals, develop two sets of teeth. There are 20 primary teeth (also called baby, milk or deciduous teeth) and 32 permanent teeth. All primary teeth are replaced except for molars, which are replaced by permanent premolars.



- Central incisor
- Lateral incisor
- Canine
- First premolar
- Second premolar
- First molar
- Second molar
- Third molar

4 human teeth X-rays
These are X-ray slides of human teeth. The teeth roots are also shown in the slides.

2 mystery items
The museum has no record of which animal these teeth belong to. What do you think?

