

Featured folklore – Animals in Dental Folklore

From toothache cures and shed tooth rituals to teething, animals and their teeth feature prominently in the folklore of dentistry. Often the animals in question are those with prominent teeth, or those whose teeth are considered to be especially strong—rats, mice, donkeys, moles, horses, dogs and wolves all appear regularly.



Figure 1 – illustration from Cottrell & Company promotional leaflet, 'Dental Folklore,' promoting Acrylucent acrylic teeth.

In his 1923 book *Folklore of the Teeth*, Leo Kanner informs us that in Wetterau, Germany, toothache could be relieved by the act of kissing a donkey.ⁱ The Ancient Greeks similarly believed that a mouthwash made from donkey milk would help to promote strong teeth and gums.ⁱⁱ

Amulets made from animal teeth appear regularly. Sometimes these are said to be efficacious against toothache and sickness, to aid in teething, or to promote a strong and healthy dentition.

In 1713, Isabella, Lady Wentworth, mother of Thomas Raby, the Earl of Strafford, wrote the following letter - espousing the benefits of wolf tooth amulets for teething - to her son:

"I have made your daughter a present of a wolf's tooth. I sent to Ireland for it and I set it hear in Gold. They are very luckey things, for my two ferst, one did dye, the other bred his (teeth) very ill, and none of the rest did for I had one for all the rest."ⁱⁱⁱ

The belief was popularized by Pliny, who also recommended the use of foal's teeth for this purpose. Hung around the neck these would ease the pain of cutting teeth—particularly if the teeth used in the amulet had never touched the ground.^{iv}

Prescriptions range from the simple – in order to assure an easy teething “permit the child to be licked by a dog,”^v – to the more complex:

"In Bohemia the mother bakes (the children should not know it) cracknels on the night of the first Lent Sunday, fixes them on the points of rods and hangs them up on trees in the garden. For each child one rod is designated. In the morning, the children are sent to the garden, with these words:

'Go to the garden, the fox has lost some cracknels there!'

The children then find the cracknels and eat them. They will never be bothered with toothache."^{vi}

To find out more on the subject of animals in dental folklore why not try one of the following:

- Carter W, Butterworth B, Carter J, Carter J. [Ethnodentistry & Dental Folklore](#). Dental Folklore Books of Kansas City, 1987
- Carter JG, Carter WJ. [Folk Dentistry - Cultural Evolution of Folk Remedies for Toothache](#). University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 1990
- Carter JG, Carter, WJ. [Of Mice and Tooth Fairies - Shed Tooth Customs from Around the World](#). University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 1990
- Ashley MP. [It's Only Teething... A Report of the Myths and Modern Approaches to Teething](#). British Dental Journal 2001; (191): 4-8

ⁱ Kanner L. [Folklore of the Teeth](#) . New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923

ⁱⁱ CAL 1964; (27): 8-10. Wendell L. *Animals in Dentistry*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Medical Times and Gazette 1860; 1 (Jan 21): 65. [No. 406.—Charm for Cutting Teeth.](#)

^{iv} Keystone Folklore Quarterly 1964; 9 (4): 123-143. Radbill S. [The Folklore of Teething.](#)

^v Carter W, Butterworth B, Carter J, Carter J. *Ethnodentistry & Dental Folklore*. Dental Folklore Books of Kansas City, 1987

^{vi} Kanner L. [Folklore of the Teeth](#) . New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923