

## My Dog's Breath Stinks – What Should I Do?

**Bruce P. Whittle, DVM**

Bad breath or halitosis in dogs and cats (and people for that matter), is often an indicator they need to have their teeth cleaned. How the teeth are cleaned is VERY important. Tartar above the gum line is mostly cosmetic, it does not really harm the tooth. Most of the problem is occurring below the gum line and we cannot see it. Plaque and tartar in the



subgingival space, the space below the gum line down to the point the gums are firmly attached to the tooth, is the real problem. Cleaning of this area requires specialized equipment and the expertise of your veterinarian. It also requires anesthesia of your pet in order to facilitate a thorough examination and treatment of the mouth. Recently, some people have been advertising “anesthesia-free teeth cleanings”. This sounds good because it avoids anesthesia, but unfortunately for your pet, they only clean above the gumline and even then not very well,

especially on the back teeth. Your veterinarian will clean the teeth subgingivally as well as above the gumline thus decreasing the incidence of periodontal disease leading to tooth loss.

A dog has 42 permanent teeth and a cat has 30 permanent teeth. We would like for these teeth to remain healthy and stay in our pet's mouth through their entire lifetime. Unfortunately, it is estimated that 80% of dogs over the age of 2 and 70% of cats have periodontal disease. Periodontal disease occurs when bacteria invade beyond the subgingival space into the periodontal ligament, the thin structure that attaches the tooth into its bony socket. It is these bacteria in the mouth that account for stinky breath. Even when your

veterinarian cleans your pet's teeth, the bacteria in the mouth start forming plaque on the tooth surfaces within hours. To prevent that plaque from hardening into tartar and to help decrease the bacterial load in the mouth, you need to provide some form of preventative care at home. The gold standard for preventative care is daily teeth



brushing. If dogs only had opposable thumbs, we could teach them to brush their own teeth before going to bed like we do! Brushing the teeth of most pets is not very difficult but it does take some time for them to become accustomed to it. If you really cannot brush your pet's teeth or are not that committed, you can use various products approved by the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) that have been proven to reduce plaque. These can take the form of special dental diets or dental chews that physically “scrub” the teeth as the pet eats, or solutions that can be added to drinking water or squirted in your pet's mouth. Beware of

advertising claims for products that seem too good to be true, unless the product carries the VOHC seal, the claims may not be proven. Your veterinarian can make recommendations for products that will work best in your situation.

While your pet is anesthetized for the professional dental cleaning, your veterinarian will also thoroughly examine the mouth and may take dental radiographs to evaluate what is happening below the gum line. Part of the examination involves looking at each tooth individually, paying particular attention to color, plaque or tartar accumulation, gingival attachment, presence of any cracks, fractures or areas of resorption, and looseness within the alveolus or tooth socket. Your veterinarian will use a periodontal probe and explorer just like your dentist does in your mouth. These will help detect periodontal pocketing that results in loss of attachment of the tooth within the socket. It will also help detect defects in the enamel that can be causing dental pain. Fortunately, dogs and cats do not get dental caries to the degree we do but they can have most of the same problems that occur in humans. Sometimes your veterinarian will detect problems once your pet is anesthetized that he or she could not see while your pet was awake. When a problem is found, your veterinarian will determine if the tooth needs to be extracted or if some type of procedure can be performed that will save the tooth. Pets can have root canal therapies too! For some types of procedures, such as root canal therapy or restorations your veterinarian may refer you to a veterinary dental specialist.

The thorough examination, diagnosis and development of a treatment plan are what your veterinarian does best. When problems are detected in their early stages, treatment can be initiated that will save the tooth. Unfortunately, many patients, both four-legged and two-



legged, are presented for dental care too late in the process and extraction is the only option. With the advances that have occurred in anesthesia and pain control in animals, your veterinarian can provide dental care to your pet in a manner that is safe and with minimal discomfort. Prior to many dental procedures being performed, the relevant nerves are numbed similar to what your dentist does to you, so that your pet can be maintained on a lower level of anesthesia during the procedure and will be afforded pain control for a period of time after they wake up. Your pet will also be monitored

during anesthesia to help maintain their health and safety.

The health of your pet's teeth is intimately related to their overall health. Chronic infection and inflammation in the mouth can have detrimental effects on other organ systems such as the cardiovascular and renal systems. Your veterinarian can help you determine how often your pet needs to have professional dental care and what you can do at home to help achieve optimal dental health. An added benefit is that proper dental care will also help prevent stinky breath. Professional dental care by your veterinarian combined with recommended home dental care will help ensure your pet maintains a healthy mouth well into old age.