



From the American Animal Hospital Association
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Open Wide, Fido and Tabby!

By Jen Reeder

Earlier this year, Matt Jackson noticed that Henry, his 6-year-old beagle, had been having "unusually stinky" breath for several weeks. So when the Long Beach, Calif., resident took Henry to his annual checkup with his veterinarian, he mentioned the bad breath.

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"They discovered that he had a cracked tooth that was turning black, and the gums around it were turning black," Jackson says. "They decided it was from him chewing on something really hard, like a stick. He was on antibiotics for 2 weeks to kill any infection that may have been festering, and then had surgery to pull that back molar."

Bad breath was a sign of an acute problem in Henry's case, but it can also be an indicator of more progressive dental issues, like periodontal disease (and its initial stage, gingivitis) in dogs and cats, and should not be taken lightly.

"Depending on the method of study, between 75% and 85% of the pet population has dental disease," says Steve Holmstrom, DVM, DAVDC and owner of AAHA-accredited Animal Dental Clinic in San Carlos, Calif. "Doggy breath' is not normal."

It's important to keep an eye on your pet's mouth for signs of dental disease not only because it can be painful, but also because poor dental health is often associated with poor overall health, he says.

Ed Eisner, DVM, DAVDC and chief of dental services at AAHA-accredited Animal Hospital Specialty Center in Highlands Ranch, Colo., agrees.

"You and I—we don't wait until we have tartar and horrible breath to go to the hygienist," Eisner says. "Why wait for the disease when you can prevent it?"

The top three things to look for in your dog's or cat's mouth are bad breath, yellow or brown tartar deposits on their teeth, and red or swollen gums. Other possible signs of dental issues include hypersalivation, fussing with their face, only eating from one side of the mouth, or any neurotic or unusual behavior. He says after performing a root canal on a Doberman with a dead tooth, the dog stopped rising slowly from its bed—the owner had thought arthritis was to blame.

Eisner says annual dental exams and professional cleanings are important for all pets, but particularly for cats, small dogs and older

For More Information:

American Veterinary Dental College website, avdc.org

Veterinary Oral Health Council website, vohc.org

AAHA Dental Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats web page, aahanet.org/Library/DentalCare.aspx

The Good News: Why

dogs that may have weaker immune systems. He says, ironically, that owners of older dogs are often worried about anesthesia for the professional cleaning, even though there is little risk and they need it most.

"Anesthesia and diagnostics and patient care has improved dramatically in the last two decades," he says. "I haven't lost a dog in over 27 years."

Another concern is that anesthesia can be expensive, but some pet insurance policies cover dental care, he noted.

Preventive care at home is important, too. Eisner suggests buying dental chews and other products that have the Seal of Acceptance from the Veterinary Oral Health Council.

Eisner says brushing pets' teeth two to three times a week is important. To do this, Holmstrom recommends positive reinforcement training—preferably starting early in life, around the time the pets are spayed/neutered—by using food as a reward and feeding them after brushing. He cautions that sometimes the dog and cat toothpastes can taste too good, and the animals will eat the toothpaste rather than have their teeth brushed.

"If they behave for the brushing with toothpaste, great. If not, plain water can be used," Holmstrom says.

Though it may seem daunting to brush your pet's teeth, it's vital for their continued health, and can be done with practice, he says.

"Many of my patients do not have legs, they have fins—marine mammals," Holmstrom says. "These guys are much less domesticated than the dog or cat. Yet they can be trained to have their teeth brushed and receive other veterinary care. This is usually done by positive reinforcement training."

Dogs and Cats Rarely Get Cavities

While there are plenty of oral diseases pet owners should worry about, cavities are at the bottom of the list. Why? Here's what Dr. Ed Eisner says:

"A cavity is a bacterial infection in the tooth that's eaten part of the tooth away. Dogs and cats don't get cavities as often as people because the bacteria that cause our cavities require an acid environment, and the pH of our saliva is about 6.5—which is acid, neutral is 7—and the pH of dogs' and cats' saliva is usually around 7.5, so it's not as conducive to cavity-forming bacteria.

"Another reason they don't get cavities as often as people is that their teeth are shaped differently—most are pointy, conical—and carnivores gulp their food, whereas our back teeth, with their flat chewing surfaces, tend to pack food between the teeth."



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Hospital Locator

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AAHA is an association of veterinary teams that are committed to excellence in companion animal care. It is the only organization that accredits animal hospitals throughout the United States and Canada.

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