

Ask A Vet: Doggie Breath Blues

Sunday, September 28, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My dog's breath has really started smelling bad over the past few weeks. Additionally, she seems to eat her food slower and tilts her head to one side while eating. What do you think could be going on and is there a dog dentist that we should take her to?

Dear Concerned Dog Owner,

While I cannot tell you exactly what is going on, hopefully you can gain some information below. It is important to have your veterinarian examine your dog's teeth and discuss possible problems. There are specific veterinary dentists, but most veterinarians are equipped and qualified to examine teeth, remove teeth if needed, and clean the teeth.

The dental health of your dog is just as important as every other part. Without regular care a dog's teeth will develop a plaque layer, which is made up of small food particles and saliva. There are millions of bacteria that live within the mouth normally (you have very similar bacteria in your mouth too!) and they feed on these small particles of food. This alone can lead to foul-smelling breath. If you do not brush your dog's teeth or use an enzymatic mouth wash, then these bacteria turn the plaque into tartar. Tartar appears as a hard, light-tan to dark brown casing covering the tooth. Some tartar development can be normal, but when it grows up to the gum-line it can start to cause significant gingivitis (inflammation of the gums). Gingivitis appears as red, swollen gums, which are often painful to touch. The primary issue with severe gingivitis and tartar extending under the gum-line is that the bacteria which caused the tartar to form now have access to your dog's bloodstream and the root of the tooth. If they invade the tooth root, the tooth will become infected and may form an abscess (pocket of pus) under the gums. If the infection spreads further into the bloodstream, the bacteria can cause infections as far away as the heart and kidneys. Frequently this damage is irreversible.

Your veterinarian may recommend a dental prophylaxis treatment, which usually involves anesthetizing your dog to examine the mouth, then using a device to remove the tartar, and then polish the teeth. If a tooth is cracked, or the roots are exposed due to an abscess, then the tooth will probably be removed and your dog will be put on a course of antibiotics. Most dogs do quite well, if teeth need to be removed. February is National Veterinary Dental Health Month, so most clinics run special deals for getting your dog's teeth evaluated and cleaned. Check with your regular veterinarian to have your dog examined and to see if there are any other specials outside of February. Oral health in your dog is as important as it is for yourself, but a dog cannot tell us when his/her mouth hurts. Therefore, it is important to bring any concerns to your veterinarian.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman