

Ask A Vet: Tackle that Horrible Halitosis

Sunday, February 9, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My dog's breath has gotten very bad. Is there some sort of breath freshener I can use to make it better?

Dear Reader,

Bad breath can certainly put a damper on cuddling with your furry friends, but it may also indicate a serious problem. Halitosis, or bad breath, is often caused by dental disease. While dental disease sounds like a problem in the mouth, it can affect all of your dog's organs and make other medical issues worse. Infection of teeth and gums (periodontal disease) causes pain and discomfort, can lead to tooth loss and has been shown to affect the liver, heart and kidneys of dogs and cats at microscopic levels. These microscopic changes can lead to, or contribute to organ disease or failure. Oral infections have been linked to heart disease and other chronic organ diseases in our pets. In addition, periodontal disease can elevate blood glucose levels in diabetic patients, making diabetic control difficult.

So, what to do about that breath? First, make an appointment for a dental exam at your veterinarian. A painless, superficial exam can usually be done while your dog is awake. For a more in depth exam or a painful mouth, sedation may be required. Or your vet may recommend a closer exam and dental treatment be done at the same time. A thorough dental cleaning and treatment or removal of diseased teeth requires general anesthesia for our pets.

Once your pet's teeth have been cleaned and any infection treated, you can help keep those chompers pearly white and prevent bad breath at home. As with you, the best way to keep those teeth clean is to brush them daily. If you have not been doing this, it may take some time to train your pet to allow it's teeth to be brushed. Your veterinarian can help you with tips on brushing. Appropriate dental chews can also be part of home dental care. There are a few water additives or "paint on" products that may be effective in helping prevent plaque. The Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) seal on a chew or other dental products means that the product has been proven effective in preventing dental plaque or tartar. For a list of VOHC approved products, go to www.vohc.org .

Another very important part of preventive dental health is regular dental exams as recommended by your veterinarian, generally at least once a year. Dental cleaning, before there is heavy tartar and gum inflammation, can prevent more serious problems and help your pet keep their teeth for a lifetime. As a bonus, a preventive dental cleaning costs as much as 75% less than dental treatment for infected, loose or broken teeth. How often your pet needs a preventive cleaning depends on many factors, but a daily home dental routine can extend the time between cleanings significantly.

-Dr. Teresa Alessandri