

My dog is 5 years old now and she has bad breath. How do I know if it is time to have her teeth cleaned?

Doggie breath is not normal. Bad breath is generally a sign that there is marked dental and possibly periodontal disease. If you lift your dog's lip and look at her teeth and see tartar (yellow to brown discoloration of the normally white teeth) and red, swollen gums it is time for a visit to your veterinarian. Tartar or dental calculus is mineralized plaque and plaque is mostly made of bacteria.

The goal of a professional cleaning under anesthesia is to remove (with hand or ultrasonic instruments) tartar from all surfaces of each tooth and then with a special instrument, scale the plaque and tartar that is under the gum. That "subgingival" material is actually more critical to remove than what you see on the tooth above the gum line. If there is bacteria and infection below the gum, the periodontal ligament attachment of the tooth to the jaw gradually is destroyed, causing pain, loose and lost teeth. The scaling is followed by high speed polishing to smooth out any scratches left in the enamel to slow the adherence of plaque after the cleaning. If you have your dog's teeth cleaned by your veterinarian, they will be assessed once she is under anesthesia to determine what grade of periodontal disease is present on each tooth. The hope is that her mouth is still in the first stage of disease, with only inflammation of the gums, termed gingivitis. This first stage is reversible with proper scaling and regular home care afterward. If the supporting soft tissue that attaches the tooth to the socket is damaged, the cleaning will help slow the process, but the damage is already irreversible.

You don't mention what size of dog you have, but generally smaller dogs are much more prone to advanced periodontal disease and tooth loss without regular professional cleanings. While she is under anesthesia, the veterinarian may also find chipped or fractured teeth, missing teeth, oral tumors or painful areas of tooth resorption. Dental radiographs (x-rays) may be needed and appropriate treatment provided. Pet owners are always concerned about the risk of general anesthesia for dental cleaning. So are veterinarians, but if pre-operative testing doesn't show any potential problems, the risk is quite minimal and outweighed by the benefit for long-term health.

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