

Bad Breath May Signal Other Problems

Bad dog breath isn't a joking matter. It could indicate serious illness.

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Who hasn't come face to face with a dog that had killer breath? Bad doggie breath isn't a joking matter. It could indicate serious illness. A sweet smell could mean diabetes, a urine smell could point to kidney disease, and a foul odor might indicate a liver disorder. A rancid or sour smell could signal an intestinal disorder or other illness, according to Junia Borden Childs, DVM, of Kirkland, Wash. A decaying smell probably indicates dental disease.

Conventional veterinarians cite dental disease as the most common cause of bad breath and treat it with cleanings, medication, tartar-control food and treats, and tooth extractions. But dental disease may not be the only problem. Holistic veterinarians look beyond the mouth and the immediate symptoms to examine the overall health of the dog, looking for other diseases that might have affected the dog's internal health or left it vulnerable to dental disease.

Practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine use acupuncture and Chinese herbs to treat and prevent disease. They believe that the body has a set of forces, including heat and cold, that must balance for the animal to be healthy. "Bad breath is usually due to what is called a 'stomach fire' condition," said Dr. Childs. "In this condition too much heat rests in the stomach. A conventional vet might call this hyperactivity of the stomach. If a stomach fire imbalance is not treated, the disharmony may develop into a more serious, related disease, such as irritable bowel syndrome."

A stomach fire condition can initially lead to ulcers and poor digestion, which manifest themselves in bad breath and possibly mouth sores, according to Dr. Childs. A dog with stomach fire may have a picky appetite or look at the food bowl but not eat, licking its chops as if its stomach weren't well. At the other extreme, the dog may react by bolting its food, raiding the trashcan and eating strange objects, such as wood or tissue.

You can treat stomach fire with a course of acupuncture and Chinese herbs. Veterinarians may also use nutritional treatment with "cooling" supplements and foods, such as nonspicy foods. To help ease digestion problems and cut down on one source of bad breath, add the following to your dog's meals: digestive enzymes, activated charcoal, alfalfa and chlorophyll. Adding a whole grain, such as brown rice or barley, to the diet may also help. If your dog has bad breath, make an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out any illnesses.