

Your dog's mouth & teeth

You probably get plenty of sloppy kisses from your canine cohort, but getting a good look at his mouth and teeth takes a little more effort. So gather your furry friend in close, gently open his mouth, and take a closer look at these critical parts of your pooch:

The gums

Lift up your dog's lips and take a look at the gums. They should be pink, not shades of red, white, yellow, or blue. Some dogs have dark pigment spots on their gums and tongue. Don't panic—that's normal.

If your dog's gums look red and swollen, that's the first sign of periodontal disease, a serious condition you'll want your veterinarian to address right away. As the condition worsens, your pet's gums will recede, and without treatment his teeth will eventually loosen and fall out. The key: Catch the condition early and take action.

The teeth

Next, look at the teeth. They should be white and clean and should not be broken or cracked. If you think a tooth may be cracked, take your dog to the veterinarian right away.



He or she will examine your dog's teeth and may take X-rays to determine the extent of the damage. Depending on the results, your veterinarian may choose to pull the tooth, restore it, or refer your pet to a veterinary dental specialist.

Just like people, dogs accumulate tartar at different rates. If your pet's teeth have lost their pearly shine, your veterinarian can take care of the problem with a professional cleaning. He or she also can tell you how often your pet's teeth need to be cleaned. Some pets may need their teeth cleaned every six months, while others can go a few years between cleanings.

Part of the difference depends on the characteristics of your dog. However, you can control some factors that affect tartar buildup.

For example, pets who eat dry food accumulate less tartar than pets who eat moist or canned food. You can also make a difference by brushing your pet's teeth at home. And if you're not up to that, you can still give your pet special treats and dental chew toys that help control tartar. Your veterinarian can recommend specific products.

A note on dog breath

Your dog's breath may not smell sweet, but it shouldn't make you flee the room. And foul odor in the mouth can indicate dental disease. Excessive drooling and lumps in your dog's mouth aren't normal either. Alert your veterinarian if you notice any of these problems.

