# Why Dogs and Cats Get Bad Breath: A Veterinarian Explains

During a recent Reddit Ask Me Anything session hosted by GREENIES brand, Dr. Thomas Hamilton (Dr. Tom), DVM, addressed one of the most common concerns among pet owners: bad breath in dogs and cats. His insights reveal that while this issue is widespread, it should never be dismissed as simply "normal."

## Key Takeaways for Pet Owners

Dr. Tom's expert guidance from the Reddit AMA can be distilled into several actionable points:

- **Never dismiss bad breath as normal.** If you notice an odor, it indicates that something needs attention.
- **Recognize that dental disease is the most likely cause,** particularly as pets age beyond their first few years.
- **Don't self-diagnose.** Other medical conditions can cause bad breath, making veterinary evaluation essential.
- **Implement a daily oral care routine.** Daily tooth brushing remains one of the most effective at-home methods for plaque control, alongside regular veterinary dental evaluations and professional cleanings when indicated.
- **Consider dental treats as a supplementary tool.** Products like GREENIES™ Dental Treats can support oral health between brushings.
- **Start prevention early.** The habits established in a pet's youth set the foundation for long-term oral health.

## The Reality Behind Pet Bad Breath

Bad breath is remarkably common in our canine and feline companions, but according to Dr. Tom, commonality does not equate to normalcy. "It is almost always a sign that something is going on and it should not be ignored," he explains. This distinction is crucial for pet owners who may have resigned themselves to accepting their pet's unpleasant breath as an inevitable part of pet ownership.

The good news? Understanding the cause can lead to effective solutions that improve both your pet's health and your daily interactions with them.

## Dental Disease: The Primary Culprit

In the vast majority of cases, bad breath stems from dental disease. Dr. Tom describes how this process unfolds: "As plaque and bacteria buildup along the gum line, inflammation, and at times, infection begin to develop, which leads to halitosis." This deterioration happens gradually, often going unnoticed until the problem has progressed significantly.

The timeline Dr. Tom outlines is particularly eye-opening. Puppies and kittens typically start with fresh breath, maintaining good oral health until their adult teeth emerge. However, the situation changes rapidly. By approximately three years of age, studies suggest a large percentage of dogs show evidence of periodontal disease. This is typically when owners first begin detecting odor, though the underlying issues have been developing for some time.

This statistic underscores an important point: dental problems in pets are not just common—they are the norm when preventive care is neglected. The prevalence of periodontal disease among relatively young dogs suggests that many pet owners either don't recognize the signs or don't realize that intervention is both possible and necessary.

## Beyond the Mouth: Other Potential Causes

While dental disease accounts for most cases of bad breath, Dr. Tom emphasizes that pet owners should not automatically assume this is always the cause. "Bad breath is not always just a dental issue," he cautions. In some instances, halitosis can signal other medical conditions that require different approaches to treatment.

These alternative causes include oral tumors, which can develop in a pet's mouth and produce distinctive odors. Additionally, systemic conditions such as kidney disease or metabolic disorders can manifest through changes in breath odor. Each of these conditions carries different implications for your pet's overall health and requires specific diagnostic approaches and treatments.

This is precisely why Dr. Tom stresses the importance of professional evaluation. "It is important not to assume the cause and to have your pet evaluated regularly by a veterinarian," he advises. A veterinarian can distinguish between dental disease and these other potential causes through examination and, when necessary, diagnostic testing.

## Taking Action: Prevention and Treatment

When dental disease is identified as the source of bad breath, Dr. Tom is clear about what makes a difference: "an oral care routine makes a big difference." He identifies daily brushing as the most effective method for controlling the plaque that leads to bad breath. While this may seem daunting to pet owners whose animals aren't accustomed to tooth brushing, starting early and maintaining consistency can make it a manageable part of your routine.

For pet owners seeking additional tools to support oral health, dental treats offer a practical supplement to brushing. Dr. Tom specifically mentions GREENIES™ Dental Treats as an option that can "help support oral health by mechanically removing plaque as part of a daily routine." The mechanical action of chewing these treats helps address plaque buildup between brushings, making them a useful adjunct to a broader oral care routine.

The key, according to Dr. Tom, is establishing these habits early in a pet's life. "Starting these habits early helps reduce plaque and tartar accumulation and supports better long-term oral health overall." This proactive approach can help pets avoid the 80% statistic, keeping them in the minority of animals who reach middle age without periodontal disease.

## The Bigger Picture: Oral Health and Overall Wellness

Dr. Tom's insights during the GREENIES AMA reveal that bad breath in pets is more than just a nuisance—it's a window into their overall health. Periodontal disease, when left untreated, can lead to pain, tooth loss, and potentially contribute to broader systemic inflammation and other health concerns.

By recognizing that bad breath is not normal and taking steps to address it—whether through daily brushing, dental treats, regular veterinary check-ups, or a combination of all three—pet owners can significantly improve their companions' quality of life. The progression from healthy puppy or kitten breath to the periodontal disease that affects the majority of adult dogs is not inevitable; it's preventable with consistent, appropriate care.

By following these principles, pet owners can help ensure that bad breath doesn't become an accepted reality in their households, but rather a solvable problem that improves both their pet's health and the bond they share. Dental treats should be considered part of a broader oral health plan and are not a substitute for professional veterinary dental care when disease is present.

## Meet Dr. Tom:

“As the Chief of Staff at Sturbridge Veterinary Hospital in Sturbridge, MA, I’ve spent the last nine years focusing on companion animal care, with a clinical focus on companion animal medicine, surgery, dentistry, and client education…and making veterinary medicine approachable for everyone. My journey into veterinary medicine started with a love for animals as a kid growing up on Long Island and was shaped by my education at UMass Amherst and St. George’s University (including clinical educational experiences affiliated with Cornell University). While I respect my early experience working with large animals, I’ve spent the last 9 years specializing in small-animal care for cats and dogs, which has always been my true passion.”

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