

Why Does My Cat Have Bad Breath?

While bad breath, or halitosis, in kitties may be a sign of systemic issues like kidney, respiratory or liver diseases or diabetes, its cause is usually due to this. Many cat owners are surprised to learn that most of the time it's something they can prevent.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Periodontal disease is the most common reason for bad breath in cats
- Regular professional dental cleanings by your veterinarian can help remove the plaque, while brushing your cat's teeth at home is an important step to preventing periodontal disease in the first place
- If your cat isn't used to regular at-home brushings, start incorporating facial and gum massages into your daily interaction with your kitty — before you even consider taking out a toothbrush
- The next step is to place one finger inside your cat's mouth, gently touching the gums very briefly
- Graduate to using a piece of thin gauze, a finger toothbrush and finally a cat toothbrush with enzymatic tooth gel
- If you stick to regular at-home brushing in between professional cleanings, and also provide a fresh, raw diet, your kitty's teeth will stay clean and healthy

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If your kitty's breath could cause paint to peel, it's a signal that something is amiss in their mouth and likely in their body. This is because bad breath, or halitosis, may be a sign of systemic issues like kidney, respiratory or liver diseases or diabetes — and it's likely the result of periodontal disease in your cat.

With periodontal disease, plaque accumulates on the teeth and gingivitis affects the gums. Regular professional dental cleanings by your veterinarian can help remove the plaque, while brushing your cat's teeth at home is an important step to preventing periodontal disease in the first place.

Many people are shocked to learn that you can brush a cat's teeth. Not only can you, but with patience and persistence, some cats may actually grow to enjoy your daily teeth brushing sessions.

Tips for Successful Kitty Teeth Brushing

Ideally, your cat will grow up accustomed to you touching their mouth and teeth, such that daily teeth brushings are part of their routine. Without this simple practice, many cats suffer from dental disease at a relatively young age. In fact, it's reported that 50% to 90% of cats older than 4 years suffer from some form of dental disease, such as gingivitis, periodontitis or tooth resorption.¹

If your cat is older and/or isn't used to regular at-home brushings, start incorporating facial and gum massages into your daily interaction with your kitty — before you even consider taking out a toothbrush. To a cat unaccustomed to brushing, the unexpected introduction of a toothbrush probably won't go over too well, so start slowly with pleasant massages to their face, mouth, lips and gums.

The next step is to place one finger inside your cat's mouth and touch their gums very briefly. You want to work in baby steps, only moving on to the next step once your cat tolerates the one before. After your cat allows you to briefly massage their gums, put a tiny dab of enzymatic tooth gel (preferably one that contains mostly natural ingredients) on your finger, gently pull kitty's lip back and quickly rub the gel over her back molars on one side.

Next step, once she tolerates toothpaste applied by fingers to teeth, is to wrap your finger with a thin piece of gauze, which will add a bit more abrasion for removing plaque than your finger alone. The next step is to brush using a finger toothbrush and then a cat toothbrush.

You can also use a soft children's size toothbrush. Some cats may also enjoy it more if you dip the toothbrush in tuna juice first.² Plaque and tartar are most likely to accumulate on the upper back molars, so if you only have a brief moment to get in your cat's mouth, focus your attention there.

I recommend spending a month or two making sure that the cat toothpaste you're using is able to reach those back teeth, and once you've thoroughly covered that area, work on moving forward in their mouth to the premolars, canines and incisors. While adding teeth brushing to your daily routine is ideal, every little bit helps — so even brushing once or twice a week is better than nothing.

Causes of Bad Breath in Cats

If you brush your cat's teeth regularly, their breath shouldn't smell. This is because teeth brushing can effectively ward off periodontal disease, the most common reason for bad breath in cats.

That being said, there are many other reasons why your cat's breath could be offensive, including skin disease involving the lips, oral trauma, such as an injury due to an electric cord, cancer, mouth sores or a mouth ulcer.³ Even debris caught in your kitty's mouth could be responsible for a bad odor.

"Food or a strand of hair or string, for example, can get lodged in the little nooks and crannies between teeth and can decompose, soon infecting the surrounding tissue," said Eric Davis, DVM, a fellow of the Academy of Veterinary Dentistry and former director of the Dental Referral Service at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine.⁴ The following types of bad breath may also be indicative of systemic diseases:⁵

- Sweet breath — diabetes
- Urine-like breath — kidney disease
- Foul-smelling breath — liver disease or an intestinal blockage

Healthy Diet Also Keeps Your Cat's Teeth Clean

The importance of a fresh species-appropriate diet cannot be overstated when it comes to your cat's dental health. Research shows feral cats eating their natural diet (prey) have dramatically less accumulation of tartar,⁶ which is why transitioning your cat off of ultraprocessed kibble and onto less refined food (ideally a raw diet) can slow how quickly oral degeneration occurs.

I say "slow" because even raw-fed pets acquire plaque and tartar — usually less, and at a slower rate, but it's a myth that all raw fed pets maintain perfect teeth. Another option to help "clean" your cat's teeth is to offer a skinless chicken neck, which may entice your cat to chew, providing mechanical abrasion to help prevent plaque buildup.

If it's been a while since you've looked in your cat's mouth — or if you never have — be aware that cats are masters at hiding pain, including that from their teeth. An oral exam from your veterinarian can help spot any problems and provide the next steps to improve your cat's oral health, including teeth cleaning under anesthesia.

However, if you stick to regular at-home brushing in between professional cleanings, and also provide a fresh, raw diet, there's a good chance your kitty's teeth will stay clean and healthy, and along with them comes fresh breath.

Sources and References

¹ [Cornell Feline Health Center, Feline Dental Disease](#)

² [Martha Stewart May 10, 2022](#)

^{3, 4, 5} [Cornell Feline Health Center, Bad Breath: Sign of Illness?](#)

⁶ [Aust Vet J. 1998 Oct;76\(10\):690-3. doi: 10.1111/j.1751-0813.1998.tb12284.x](#)
