

Bad breath, halitosis for you techies, occurs quite commonly in our companions. This is especially true with dogs and cats and is most commonly due to dental disease. There are cases, however, that are not caused by primary dental disease but instead have other underlying processes leading to this problem.

Halitosis is caused by bacteria that live in the mouth and produce a foul odor when they “set up shop.” These bacteria cause plaque which then leads to tartar on the teeth and eventual decay and abscessing of the affected teeth. Halitosis can also occur from bacteria that are not causing teeth problems.

Muffin is three years old and lives her life entirely indoors. She eats two meals a day of dry food and does share her domain with Freddie. Oh, both Muffin and Freddie are cats. Muffin has had a several month long history of bad breath with one brief hiatus from the odor for a few weeks after having her teeth cleaned. Recently, Muffin’s care taker, Alicia, has noticed that Muffin appears to be eating her food more slowly and acts as if her mouth hurts when she eats. Alicia has also noticed that Muffin’s gums are very red.

What Alicia is describing is gingivitis, which literally means inflammation of the gums. This can be a primary disease or secondary to another disease process causing inflammation of the gums.

The most common cause of gingivitis in cats is dental disease. As I mentioned, plaque, which is a soft material, builds up on the teeth and then is turned to tartar, which is a hard, concrete like material, with the help of bacteria in the mouth. This process progresses, slowly destroying the structure of the tooth. Alicia mentioned that Muffin has recently had her teeth cleaned and that it did initially greatly improve the breath issue, only to have the halitosis return, now apparently without the concomitant dental disease. It is time for another visit to Muffin’s veterinarian.

The red gums and gingerly chewing described by Alicia could be indicative of primary gingivitis. This is a disease caused by the infiltration of inflammatory cells from the cat’s immune system into the gum area of the mouth. This response by the immune system creates the gingivitis. To diagnose this disease we take a small sample of the gum tissue and send it to the pathologist, who can then identify the process causing the gum inflammation.

Once a diagnosis is reached, therapy can begin and the gums can heal. Once the inflammation is gone, the bacterial problem causing the halitosis will decrease as well. Not to mention the most important fact: Muffin will be a much happier cat.

Incidentally, there are cases in our companions where halitosis is present without dental disease or gingivitis. These patients simply harbor certain types of bacteria in their mouths that produce particularly pungent odor. These patients need breath freshener.