

# When That Little Tongue Won't Go Back In

Whether your dog's tongue-out smile is a part of their personality or something you must manage, your attention and care are important for their well-being. Here's what you should know about this condition.

Reviewed by Dr. Elizabeth Hardoon

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A dog's tongue hanging out while resting could be more than a harmless quirk; it may be a medical condition called Hanging Tongue Syndrome that deserves your attention
- Common causes include dental disease, missing teeth, jaw structure, traumatic injury, and nerve damage. This is especially common in brachycephalic or "flat-faced" breeds such as Pugs and Bulldogs; as well as small breeds including Chihuahuas and Yorkies
- Warning signs such as dryness, cracking or discoloration of the tongue or difficulty eating may signal discomfort or infection and should prompt a veterinary consultation
- Although the condition is typically lifelong, most dogs live comfortably with proper care, including proper hydration, protection from extreme weather and soft food when needed
- Monitoring your dog's tongue daily and maintaining dental hygiene are key steps in preventing complications and keeping your pet happy and healthy

Many dog owners have encountered the sight of their pet with its tongue hanging out. Often, this endearing trait is harmless and simply part of a dog's normal behavior. However, when a dog consistently has its tongue hanging out — particularly when at rest or asleep — it could be a condition called Hanging Tongue Syndrome.

Whether your dog has always had this characteristic or it has appeared recently, being informed allows you to make the best decisions for their health and comfort. Find out the underlying reasons why this condition occurs and how you can help support your pet's well-being.

## What Is Hanging Tongue Syndrome?

As its name implies, hanging tongue syndrome refers to a condition where a dog's tongue hangs out of its mouth for prolonged periods and cannot be fully retracted. It should not be confused with panting, where a dog has its tongue hanging out to keep cool, such as during or after exercise, in hot weather, or even at room temperature in heavily coated breeds. Rather, this syndrome involves a persistent and often passive protrusion of the tongue; even during periods of sleep or relaxation, their tongue is hanging out.<sup>1</sup>

The tongue may stick out forward or fall out the side of their mouth.<sup>2</sup> While many dogs display this condition, hanging tongue syndrome can be indicative of an underlying condition. Dental issues, structural abnormalities, injury, neurological conditions, or congenital traits could all result in this condition.

Hanging tongue syndrome can affect a dog's health and quality of life in varying degrees. In some dogs, it is simply a cosmetic oddity and does not have health implications. But for others, it may result in discomfort, dryness, or complications that require a trip to the veterinarian's office.

## Common Causes of Hanging Tongue Syndrome

There are several reasons a dog's tongue might hang out persistently, which can be divided into a few categories:

1. **Dental issues and tooth loss** — Dental health plays a major role in maintaining the normal position of a dog's tongue. Teeth, particularly the lower canine teeth located at the front of the jaw, help to keep the tongue in place. When these teeth fall out, whether due to age, injury, or dental disease, the tongue may begin to slip out of the mouth.

According to veterinary data, approximately 80% to 90% of dogs over the age of 3 suffer from some form of dental disease.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly common in smaller breeds such as Chihuahuas and Yorkshire Terriers.<sup>4</sup> As dental disease progresses, it may lead to tooth extractions or tooth loss, which reduces structural support for the tongue and can cause it to protrude permanently.

2. **Congenital or physical abnormalities** — Some dog breeds with unique anatomical features that affect the jaw, mouth, or tongue are genetically predisposed to developing Hanging Tongue Syndrome. One example is "Brachycephalic" breeds like Pugs, Bulldogs and Shih Tzus. The genetics that cause these breeds to have round flat faces also cause them to have shorter skulls, smaller mouths and bigger tongues. As a result, their tongues do not fit entirely inside their mouths and will naturally protrude.<sup>5,6</sup>

Other small breeds may also have an underbite or overbite, which prevents their mouth from fully closing around the tongue.<sup>7</sup> In such dogs, hanging tongue syndrome may appear early in life and persist throughout their lifetime. While this form of the condition is generally harmless, it requires careful monitoring to prevent complications from dryness, exposure, or irritation.

3. **Injury or trauma** — Injuries to the jaw, tongue, or surrounding structures can also lead to a protruding tongue. Trauma from accidents, surgical procedures, or physical damage can alter the anatomy of the mouth or cause nerve damage that interferes with the normal function of the tongue.

For example, some dogs treated for oral tumors may undergo a partial jaw removal, which results in structural changes that prevent the tongue from staying inside the mouth.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, nerve injuries can reduce muscle control, making it difficult for the dog to retract the tongue voluntarily.<sup>9</sup>

In these cases, the degree of hanging tongue syndrome will depend on the severity of the trauma and the degree of nerve or muscle damage. If your dog's condition is caused by this, they may need your assistance with day-to-day activities, like eating, drinking, and grooming.

4. **Neurological disorders** — Although less common, certain neurological conditions can result in hanging tongue syndrome. These conditions may impair the dog's ability to control tongue movement, either through direct damage to the nerves responsible for muscle movement or through broader neurological issues affecting the brain and spinal cord.

In some cases, a hanging tongue can also arise if your dog suddenly takes a new medication, according to Dog Time. If this happens, contact your veterinarian to see if the medication should be discontinued or adjusted.<sup>10</sup>

# Recognizing the Signs of Trouble

Not every instance of a hanging tongue is cause for concern, however. Ideally, you should keep an eye out for warning signs that may indicate an underlying problem requiring a trip to your vet’s office. These include:<sup>11</sup>

- Dry or cracked tongue
- Discoloration of both the tongue and gums (which can be a sign of infection)
- Swelling or bleeding
- Difficulty eating or drinking

## Hanging Tongue Syndrome Is a Manageable Condition

Hanging tongue syndrome is usually a lifelong condition, but with proper care, your pet can lead a healthy and comfortable life. What’s important is to make sure you provide consistent care for your furry friend to prevent complications.

Daily monitoring is essential; regularly check the condition of your dog’s tongue and gums, especially during extreme weather or after physical activity. Here are additional guidelines to remember:

- Ensure they have access to clean, fresh water at all times to keep them hydrated.
- Apply a dog-safe lubricant like coconut oil to your dog’s tongue to prevent cracking and dryness.
- Limit their exposure to extreme heat or cold to avoid sunburn or frostbite on their tongue.
- Offer soft or moistened food, especially for pets with missing teeth, as chewing may be difficult.
- Use a pet-safe humidifier during dry weather to maintain moisture in the air.

Hanging tongue syndrome is not a cause for alarm, and usually gives your dog a unique and adorable appearance. However, it is still important to stay attentive to changes in your pet’s health and to recognize when a charming quirk may be a sign of something more serious.

### Sources and References

<sup>1,2,4,5,8</sup> [PetLab Co., May 5, 2025](#)  
<sup>3</sup> [Cornell Richard P. Riney Canine Health Center, Periodontal Disease \(Archived\)](#)  
<sup>6,7,9</sup> [Wag, July 13, 2017](#)  
<sup>10,11</sup> [Dog Time, February 17, 2025](#)

---