

Your Pet's Grin May Be Hiding a Big Secret

Have you ever noticed strange hairs poking up from your pet's gums or even from the roof of his mouth? As crazy as it sounds, it's probably not you think, but rather a sign that something is wrong elsewhere with your pet's body. Why you need to get to the root cause — and fast.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your dog has “hairy teeth,” it’s actually a condition called subgingival hair
- Dogs with short, coarse coats and skin disorders that cause excessive licking are prime candidates for subgingival hair
- Subgingival hair can lead to gum disease, so it should be removed as soon as it’s discovered. In addition, the underlying cause of the dog’s itchy skin should be identified and treated to prevent recurrence
- How quickly plaque, tartar and gum disease develop in your dog’s mouth depends on a number of factors including his age, overall health, diet, breed, genetics, and the care his teeth receive from both you and your veterinarian
- If you suspect your canine companion has gum disease, make an appointment with your veterinarian as soon as possible

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A strange problem that veterinarians occasionally encounter while doing oral exams on dogs is a condition known as subgingival hair.

The typical patient has a short, coarse coat (think Labrador Retriever, Beagle, or Bulldog), and the hairs are usually poking up from the gums around the canines, incisors, or the hard palate (the bony plate in the roof of the mouth).

It’s important to note these are not foreign hairs from, say, a prey animal, another dog, or a cat. They are the “hair of the dog,” so to speak, meaning they come from the dog’s own coat.

Most dogs with subgingival hair are suffering from an inflammatory skin condition such as atopy (allergic disease), demodicosis (a form of mange), or flea allergy dermatitis.

The dog’s itchy, inflamed skin causes him to excessively lick and gnaw at himself, which can result in guard hairs — the long, stiff coat hairs — becoming embedded in his gums.

Subgingival Hair Can Lead to Periodontal Disease

So now that you know the hair in your dog's mouth comes from her own coat, you can relax, right? Wrong!

Even though subgingival hair is composed of your dog's own cells and seems innocent enough, it's likely her mouth will wage war against it. The hair is seen as a foreign invader by the gums, which will mount an immune response that results in inflammation.

To make matters worse, the hair trapped in the gums can attract bacteria, leading to further inflammation, infection, potential tooth loss, and mouth pain.

How bad the situation gets depends on a variety of factors. Some dogs have little to no response to subgingival hair, while others have the potential to develop a serious gum infection, receding gums, fissures (splits in the gum), and bone loss.

Since the condition of a dog's gums can change from healthy to a state of advanced disease in just a matter of weeks, make an appointment with your veterinarian if you notice subgingival hair in your dog's mouth.

Bottom line — large amounts of hair anywhere on your dog other than her coat can create problems, so if she has hair in her mouth, it needs to be removed by your veterinarian as soon as possible to prevent periodontal disease.

Getting to the Root of Your Dog's Hairy Teeth

If subgingival hair appears to be the only issue in your dog's mouth, your veterinarian may be able to remove it right in the exam room using a cotton-tipped applicator. However, if the area is inflamed or bleeding, a more thorough oral examination may be required while your dog is anesthetized.

Just as important as removing the subgingival hair is identifying and resolving the underlying cause for your dog's obsessive licking. It's important to get the licking under control or he'll continue to get hair stuck in his gums.

In addition, there's a good chance your furry friend is feeling pretty miserable if he's constantly self-grooming, so it's important to treat his skin condition to relieve his suffering.

The goal should be to resolve the cause of your dog's itchy, irritated skin so that he doesn't feel the need to lick and chew at himself. In the meantime, make sure to check his mouth each day and remove any hair in his gums either by brushing his teeth (gauze works well to help remove hair) or using a Q-tip.

There's an Epidemic of Periodontal Disease in Pets

Periodontal or gum disease is an inflammation of some or all of a tooth's deep supporting structures. Unfortunately, estimates suggest that around 80% of dogs three years of age or older have periodontal disease.

In addition to the presence of subgingival hair, other more commonly seen causes of gum disease include an inherited tendency, a structural defect, processed diets, lack of regular brushing and oral exams, or very often, a combination of these factors. There are four stages of gum disease:

- Stage 1 presents as gingivitis but without separation of the gum from the tooth. There will typically be some plaque and mild gum redness. The problem is reversible at this stage.
- In stage 2, there will be plaque below the gum line, redness and swelling, and perhaps some loss of attachment of teeth to gums. The condition is still reversible at this stage.
- Stage 3 will feature calculus (tartar) below the gum line causing from 10% to 30% loss of bone support, redness, swelling, bleeding and obvious gum recession. The condition at this stage is irreversible, but attention to the problem will slow down the progression.
- Stage 4 is marked by significant amounts of calculus below the gum line, severe inflammation, gum recession, loose and missing teeth, pus and bleeding from the gums. Bone loss will be over 30%, and the condition is irreversible. At this stage, the mouth can become a source of systemic infection for the rest of the body.

The process of periodontal disease starts with bits of food and bacteria (or subgingival hair) that remain in your dog's mouth. This residue forms a layer of plaque on the teeth and gums.

Left unaddressed, the plaque will soon harden to tartar that sticks to your dog's teeth. A buildup of tartar will irritate the gums, causing them to become inflamed. This is the condition known as gingivitis. The inflammation causes your dog's gums to turn from healthy pink to angry red.

If the tartar is allowed to remain, it will build up under the gums. Eventually, the tartar accumulation will cause the gums to pull away from the teeth.

How quickly plaque, tartar and gum disease develop in your dog's mouth depends on a number of factors including his age, overall health, diet, breed, genetics, and the care his teeth receive from both you and your veterinarian.

Signs to Watch For

Signs that your dog has periodontal disease can include:

- Bad breath
- Red, inflamed, bleeding gums
- Drooling
- Loose teeth, tooth loss
- Difficulty chewing
- Loss of appetite
- Mouth sensitivity
- Digestive issues
- Pawing at the mouth
- Irritable or depressed mood

If you suspect your canine companion has gum disease, make an appointment with your veterinarian as soon as possible. If disease is present, you and your vet will need to take immediate steps to arrest the problem at the earliest stage possible.

A Few Tips to Help Keep Your Dog's Mouth in Good Condition

- **Brush your dog's teeth**, preferably every day, or at least several times a week.
- **Feed a species appropriate, preferably raw diet** — When your pet gnaws on raw meat, it acts as a natural toothbrush. Raw fed animals have substantially less dental disease than their dry fed counterparts, but unfortunately, feeding great food alone is not always enough to prevent dental disease.
- **Offer recreational raw bones** — Offering your dog raw knucklebones to gnaw on can help remove tartar the old fashioned way — by grinding it off through mechanical chewing.

There are some rules to offering raw bones (not for pets with pancreatitis, diseases of the mouth, weak or fractured teeth, resource guarders, "gulpers," etc.) so ask your holistic vet if raw bones would be a good "toothbrush" for your dog.

- **Perform routine mouth inspections** — Your dog should allow you to open his mouth, look inside, and feel around for loose teeth or unusual lumps or bumps on the tongue, under the tongue, along the gum line and on the roof of his mouth.

After you do this a few times, you'll become aware of any changes that occur from one inspection to the next. You should also make note of any differences in the smell of your dog's breath that aren't diet-related.

- **Arrange for regular oral exams performed by your veterinarian** — He or she will alert you to any existing or potential problems in your pet's mouth, and recommend professional teeth cleaning under anesthesia, if necessary.

Sources and References

[dvm360 February 10, 2016](#)

[dvm360 December 19, 2012](#)
