

Dear Dr. Wise:

Question: Mitzi, our nine-year-old poodle, smells like a candidate for a mouth commercial. When I looked in her mouth, I found a lot of buildup on her teeth and even a couple spots where her gums were bleeding. I have heard that dogs need to have their teeth cleaned. Is Mitzi too old? Also, she sneezes frequently and has a nasty discharge from one side of her nose. Could this be related to the teeth?

Answer: It sounds like Mitzi would benefit a great deal from having her teeth cleaned. I'm not concerned that she has the brightest teeth on the block, but do worry that she will suffer from gum disease and irreversible changes to the gums and tooth roots.

Mitzi's bleeding gums probably indicate that tartar buildup on her teeth is in contact with her gums. Since tartar is just hardened bacteria and food deposits, it is a constant source of infection in the mouth. As it touches the gums, the infection (gingivitis) can spread to the tooth roots and lead to abscesses and loss of teeth. These bacterial infections also can enter the blood stream and set up infections in the heart and other vital organs.

The sneezing and nasal discharge could stem from a number of causes including Mitzi's tartar problem. The roots of the two upper canines (fang teeth) project up near the nasal cavity. Any infection in their roots could spread to the nose. If this is the case, the offending tooth probably should be extracted.

'When cleaning a dog's teeth it is important to remove any tartar under the gums. Your veterinarian probably will anesthetize Mitzi and use an electronic tool which vibrates and dislodges the tartar.

Mitzi is not too old for this procedure. In fact, infections that spread from teeth and gums are quite common and can shorten her life.

Dogs and cats vary widely in the amount of dental care they need. Some develop problems early and need annual cleanings. Others should have their teeth examined every year but may need cleaning occasionally.

Dry food acts as an abrasive on teeth and may help prevent tartar buildup. Many owners successfully reduce dental problems by brushing their pet's teeth twice a week. They use a brush or gauze with tooth paste or baking soda. For Mitzi, a tooth cleaning by the veterinarian is in order. Then, start a brushing regimen.

If you have a question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN 46225