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BONUS INSIDE!



# What *color* is your dog's TONGUE?

The answer could tell you something *important* about his health.

By Michelle Tilghman, DVM, CVA, CCRP

Do you ever really look at your dog's tongue? You probably see it whenever he's panting after exercise, or using it to lick his coat or kiss your face. But aside from that, you probably don't take much notice of it. So you may not realize that the tongue may be used as a health indicator for your dog.

The tongue can be the first-line diagnostic tool in keeping him healthy and is a very easy way to monitor his well-being. Changes in its appearance provide clues that may warn of health problems, and prompt us to look further for a complete diagnosis.

Traditional Chinese Medicine has an entire branch devoted to tongue diagnosis. TCM tongue diagnosis is categorized by color, shape, width and coating. Covering all these categories is beyond the scope of this article, so we'll focus on color here.

## PINK

The normal color of a healthy tongue should be a deep pink. When hot, the tongue will normally be red due to the heat that is being released from the vessels, so the best time to look at

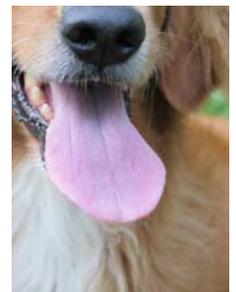
your dog's tongue is when he's at rest. The younger the animal, the pinker the color, due to his vitality.

If you notice other colors in your dog's tongue, don't panic. It may simply be due to the pigmentation that is normal in many breeds, such as the Chow.

## PALE PINK

Pale pink can be normal in an older dog, but it can also mean there is some decrease in vitality of an animal. Anemia can make the tongue look paler due to the decrease in red blood cells. Having regular bloodwork done by your veterinarian can make sure there is no anemia. It is important to have this bloodwork done yearly, especially as the dog ages.

In TCM terms, pale pink can also be a deficiency of Blood/Qi (the life force or energy found in every living being). Blood Deficiency can contribute to poor skin conditions and other



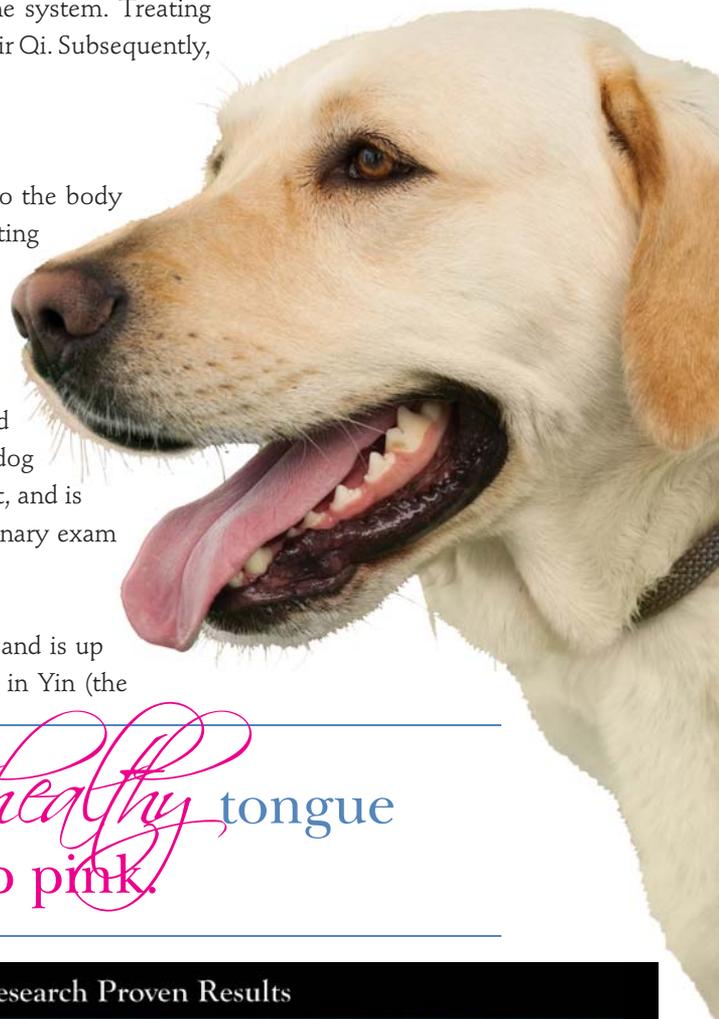
Normal canine tongue color.

illness. The Blood in TCM also includes vitality and a strong immune system. Treating Blood-deficient animals with Chinese herbs and good diets increases their Qi. Subsequently, the tongue will become a darker pink and the skin issues resolve.

## RED

A red tongue can occur in a dog that is hot and panting, and is due to the body cooling off through the respiratory system – so in this situation, panting with a red tongue is normal. If this isn't the case, a red tongue can mean there is an increase of heat in the body. The kind of heat I am talking about is seen in dogs with inflammation or pain. Pain can be well hidden in dogs; many times they are stoical about it and will not vocalize their discomfort. However, excessive panting with a red tongue, when the dog is at rest, can be an indication of pain. An older dog with a red tongue that wakes you up panting in the middle of the night, and is always changing position, could be suffering from pain. A good veterinary exam and some radiographs would be indicated in this case.

Additionally, in TCM, an older animal that is panting in a cool house and is up in the middle of the night may have a red tongue due to a decrease in Yin (the



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cooling properties of the body) and an increase in Yang (the hot properties of the body). This is comparable to the hot flashes women have in menopause after their Yin has decreased. These dogs respond well to acupuncture and Chinese herbal therapy.

A red tongue can also mean the heat is arising from the use of medications such as steroids; you can see this as the dog drinks more water to cool his body down.

Dogs with elevated liver enzymes can also have a red tongue, especially around the edges. Remember that the tongue is only one indicator of the body's condition, so no diagnosis should be based on the tongue alone.

## Quick Tongue facts

The tongue is a fleshy movable muscle that is found in the mouths of most vertebrates. It bears sensory end organs and small glands. In most animals, it functions primarily for taking in, tasting and swallowing food, as well as for grooming.

In humans, of course, the tongue is used for speaking as well as eating. The tongue contains many blood vessels, which is why it's such a good indicator for vascular health.



## BLUE

A blue or cyanotic tongue is of grave concern. Blue coloring is due to a decreased profusion of blood and means the heart is not working properly. The dog's tongue may look fine when he is at rest, but when you stress his heart by doing something like clipping his nails, the tongue turns blue. This means you need to take an immediate trip to the veterinarian to have his heart checked.

Many toy breeds and Cavalier King Charles spaniels have a mitral valve that does not function well, and that progressively degenerates and causes heart disease as they age. The tongue can be an indicator of this disease before the dog becomes symptomatic, so watch for any blue color.

## PURPLE/LAVENDER

Purple and lavender tongues are seen in dogs with some stasis in the body. Stasis is a TCM term that means there is an area where circulation and digestion are not moving freely, resulting in slowness in the pancreas, liver, small and large intestines. We see purple/lavender tongues in dogs with acute problems such as pancreatitis, diarrhea and constipation. We also see them in animals with chronic problems like irritable bowel and the use of chemotherapy drugs. The tongue will have areas of purple/lavender toward the middle of the tongue when digestion is impaired. Interesting patterns of lavender appear on the tongues of dogs undergoing chemotherapy for cancer.



Purple tongue.

In TCM, different areas of the tongue correspond to different conditions and areas of the body. But the best place to start is by monitoring the color of your dog's tongue. In fact, TCM books on the human tongue state that the tongue is a better monitor of health than the pulse. This means you can assist your veterinarian in keeping your dog healthy by reporting any changes his tongue color. Stay observant and enjoy those kisses! 🐾

The *tongue* contains many blood vessels, which is why it's such a good indicator for **vascular health**.