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Why Does My Pet Snore and Choke so Much?

A common cause of snoring in dogs, and their owners, is an excess of soft tissue in the upper airway (Elongated Soft Palate). This extra tissue can obstruct the normal passage of air, create turbulence, vibrate and generate the 'buzz-saw' sound we all know and love. This extra tissue can also cause a condition known as 'Reverse Sneezing' or 'Choke' (Entrapped Epiglottis) during periods of excitement or exercise.

What is an 'Elongated Soft Palate'?

The roof of the mouth is hard; the hard palate. As it extends towards the back of the throat, it becomes soft and flabby; the soft palate. In some dogs (especially those with 'pushed-in' facial features like Cavaliers, Boxers and Pugs) this soft palate can be too long and create problems like snoring. Often, this elongated soft palate is not a problem but may become worse during periods of inflammation of the upper airway due to infection, allergies or trauma.

What is an 'Entrapped Epiglottis'?

The wind-pipe (trachea) is a rigid tube that is permanently maintained so as to allow free and easy passage of air in and out of the lungs. The food-pipe (oesophagus) however, is a soft, collapsing tube that only opens and expands to allow the passage of food, water and saliva. When swallowing, a valve will swing back, close the open end of the trachea, protect the airway and then reset when swallowing is complete.

This valve is called the epiglottis and in dogs with an elongated soft palate, there's a catch. As the epiglottis swings back in to the open position it gets caught on the soft palate and is trapped; its not quite open and its not quite closed. They then can't swallow because the airway's not protected and can't breathe properly either because all of their air is traveling in and out via the nose, not the more efficient mouth. So they end up doing a kind of cough/gag/choke/sneeze until the epiglottis resets itself and breathing returns to normal.

Are these problems serious?

Snoring on its own is not a serious health problem in animals. It can be an indication of soft palate problems however, and increase the risk that epiglottis problems may also develop. Severe, recurring bouts of having an entrapped epiglottis can be a health risk and dogs have been known to faint during episodes. Most mild cases are merely a cause for occasional concern but no more.

Can I do anything about it?

It is possible, with surgery, to shorten soft palates that are too long. It's a fairly routine procedure that only requires a short general anaesthetic and no over-night stay in hospital. Minor snoring problems or occasional epiglottis entrapments probably do not warrant surgery and can often be maintained with observation and occasional medication.

***If you have any further questions about your pet's problems,
please don't hesitate to ask.***

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