

# Why You Should Skip Dental Cleaning Without Anesthesia

Nonprofessional dental scaling that doesn't require anesthesia is widely promoted for maintaining your pet's dental health, but is it a good option? Find out why it doesn't address at least 60% of your pet's dental risk and why it may be recklessly dangerous and stressful for your pet.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Oral disease is an epidemic among today's dogs and cats — over 70% have some degree of gum disease by their second year of life
- Plaque and tartar buildup on your pet's teeth can not only do irreversible damage to his oral health, but also to his heart health
- The majority of pets require both home dental care and professional dental exams cleanings to maintain their oral health
- Steps you can take at home to help keep your dog's or cat's mouth healthy include daily tooth brushing, feeding the right diet, and offering recreational bones or high-quality dental chews
- Perform routine mouth inspections, 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 the mouth

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Oral/dental disease is the number one medical problem among today's pets, with over 70% of dogs and cats suffering some form of periodontal disease by the age of 2.

The problem has become epidemic because most family pets don't eat the kind of diet that helps to keep their teeth clean. In addition, most dogs and cats don't receive regular home and/or professional dental care, and they don't show signs of discomfort or pain until there's a significant problem in their mouth.

Unfortunately, the risk of painful mouth conditions — in particular, gum disease, tooth resorption and oral cancer — is dramatically increased for older dogs and cats. This means that for your senior or geriatric pet, proper dental care is especially important.

## How Gum Disease Develops and Why It's a Bigger Problem Than You May Think

When plaque isn't removed from your pet's teeth, it collects there and around the gum line and within a few days hardens into tartar. Tartar sticks to the teeth and ultimately irritates the gums. Irritated gums become inflamed — a condition known as gingivitis.

If your dog or cat has gingivitis, the gums will be red rather than pink and his breath may be noticeably stinky. If the tartar isn't removed, it will build up under the gums, eventually causing them to pull away from the teeth. This creates small pockets in the gum tissue that become repositories for additional bacteria.

At this stage, your pet has developed an irreversible condition, periodontal disease, which causes considerable pain and can result in abscesses, infections, loose teeth and bone loss.

When periodontal disease is present, the surface of the gums is weakened. The breakdown of gum tissue allows mouth bacteria to invade your pet's bloodstream and travel throughout his body. If his immune system doesn't kill off the bacteria, it can reach the heart and infect it.

Studies have shown that oral bacteria, once launched into the bloodstream, seem able to fight off attacks by the immune system. What many pet parents don't realize is there's an established link between gum disease and endocarditis, which is an inflammatory condition of the valves or inner lining of the heart.

Researchers also suspect certain strains of oral bacteria may lead to heart problems. Some types of bacteria found in the mouths of pets produce sticky proteins that can adhere to artery walls, causing them to thicken. Mouth bacteria are also known to promote the formation of blood clots that can damage the heart.

How quickly these events take place depends on a number of factors, including your pet's age, breed, genetics, diet, overall health, and the frequency and quality of dental care he receives. It's also important to realize that some pets will require regular professional cleanings even when their owners are doing everything right in terms of home care.

## **What to Expect When Your Pet Needs a Professional Teeth Cleaning**

Veterinary dental cleanings require general anesthesia. Nonprofessional dental scaling (NPDS), also known as anesthesia-free dentistry, is not a good substitute in cases of moderate to severe dental disease. A truly thorough oral exam and cleaning (and extractions, if needed) can't be accomplished on a pet who is awake.

It's dangerous to use sharp instruments in the mouth of a conscious animal, and needless to say, the procedure is very stressful for the pet with significant oral disease. NPDS is a great way to prevent dental disease from occurring, however, so beginning this practice when pets are young is a terrific way to prevent plaque and tartar from developing.

Prior to the oral exam and cleaning, your pet will undergo a physical exam and blood tests to ensure she can be safely anesthetized for the procedure. The day of the cleaning, she'll be sedated and a tube will be placed to maintain a clear airway and so that oxygen and anesthetic gas can be given.

An IV catheter should also be placed so that fluids and anesthesia can be administered as appropriate throughout the procedure and your pet should be monitored by sophisticated anesthetic monitoring equipment. Make sure your veterinarian does both these things. If you're wondering why pets require general anesthesia and intubation for a seemingly simple procedure, there are a number of benefits:

- Anesthesia immobilizes your dog or cat to ensure her safety and cooperation during a confusing, stressful procedure
- It provides for effective pain management during the procedure

- It allows for a careful and complete examination of all surfaces inside the oral cavity, as well as the taking of digital x-rays, which are necessary to address issues that are brewing below the surface of the gums that can't be seen and could cause problems down the road
- It permits your veterinarian to probe and scale as deeply as necessary below the gum line where 60% or more of plaque and tartar accumulate
- Intubation while the patient is under general anesthesia protects the trachea and prevents aspiration of water and oral debris

While your pet is anesthetized, her teeth will be cleaned with an ultrasonic scaler as well as a hand scaler to clean under and around every tooth. Your vet will use dental probes to measure the depths of the pockets in the gum around each tooth, and x-rays should be taken.

Most vets use digital technology now, so you don't have to panic about overwhelming radiation exposure from dental x-rays. Many clients are become frustrated when this step is skipped, as radiographs have the ability to identify brewing issues we can't see externally.

Many patients require a second anesthesia within several months of a dentistry without x-rays because the retained baby teeth or festering tooth root infection wasn't a problem when teeth were cleaned but became a problem shortly after. The only way to know what's happening below the crown of the tooth is to check (by taking a digital x-ray).

Once all the plaque and tartar is off the teeth, your pet's mouth will be rinsed and each tooth will be polished. The reason for polishing is to smooth any tiny grooves on the teeth left by the cleaning so they don't attract more plaque and tartar. After polishing, the mouth is rinsed again.

The oral exam, x-rays and cleaning with no tooth extractions usually takes about 45 minutes to an hour. The cost will depend on where you live, and typically ranges from around \$300 to \$1,000. Veterinary dental specialists often charge more. Extractions are typically priced according to the type of tooth and the time and work needed to remove it. There are simple extractions, elevated extractions and extractions of teeth with multiple roots, which tend to be the priciest.

## Five Steps to Help Keep Your Pet's Mouth Healthy

1. **Feed a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate, fresh food diet, and feed it raw if possible** — When your dog or cat gnaws on raw meat, it acts as a kind of natural toothbrush and dental floss.
2. **If you have a dog, offer recreational bones and/or a fully digestible, high-quality dental dog chew to help control plaque and tartar** — The effect of dental chews is similar to raw bones, but safer for power chewers or dogs who have restorative dental work and can't chew raw bones.
3. **Brush your pet's teeth, preferably every day** — If every day is too tall an order, commit to do it several times a week. A little time spent each day brushing your dog's or kitty's teeth can be tremendously beneficial in maintaining her oral health and overall well-being.
4. **Perform routine mouth inspections** — Your pet 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 the 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 pet's breath that aren't diet-related.

5. **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.

Daily homecare and as-needed professional or NPDS cleanings by your veterinarian or dental professional are the best way to keep your pet's mouth healthy and disease-free. They are also important for pets with chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and kidney failure.

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