

Why Do Pets Need Anesthesia for Routine Dental Care?

Pets, like people, need routine professional dental care in order to maintain a healthy and pain-free mouth and to prevent secondary systemic diseases. Our pets are unable to comprehend a professional dental cleaning. If people are frightened by the sounds and the smells in a dental operator, imagine the feelings of a beloved pet. It is unreasonable to ask a cat or dog to have their teeth charted by probing and examining each tooth individually, cleaning above and below the gumline, and placing X-ray film or a digital cassette in their mouth and asking them to hold their mouth open and hold still. Then there is the water and the suction and the polishing.

Then there is the water and the suction and the polishing. Doing this to a dog or cat with a healthy mouth would be difficult. Imagine how difficult it would be if there were painful broken teeth, abscesses or tooth resorptions. All pets, old or young, need to be anesthetized for their teeth to be cleaned, charted, and X-rayed properly and safely. Because a professional dental cleaning requires plaque and tartar to be removed both above and below the gumline, your pet's dental health care team will need to have your pet's mouth open and unmoving to be able to perform the procedure safely and thoroughly.

For safety and comfort, your pet will need to be under general anesthesia, where both an inhalant gas and oxygen are being administered through a breathing tube. A hospital or clinic that observes the 2013 AAHA Dental Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats will continuously monitor your pet while he or she is under anesthetic. A trained veterinary technician or assistant will monitor your pet from the time the anesthesia begins until your pet is fully awake and conscious of his or her surroundings.

An awake oral exam will be performed on your pet by your veterinarian to design a preliminary diagnostic plan. It is not until your pet is anesthetized that a complete and thorough evaluation can be accomplished, including tooth-by-tooth visual exam, probing and radiographic exam to determine a more specific treatment plan.

It is important that you have communicated with the veterinary team what your wishes are when further problems are uncovered after the X-rays have been taken. For example, some hospitals have the clients stay during the procedure so they can show them any problems found on X-ray while the teeth are being cleaned. Other hospitals will want to be able to contact you by phone to discuss any issues. You may want to research the problems your pet has, which means that you will use the first procedure as a diagnostic tool and bring your pet back a second time for the treatment portion of the procedure. Dental cleanings that are done without an anesthetic may make your pet's teeth look clean, but will not produce a healthier mouth. Without anesthesia, it is impossible to clean the inside surfaces of the teeth or under the gums where periodontal disease develops. Without the use of the correct instruments and procedures, such as polishing tooth surfaces, an environment will be created where plaque and tartar will develop more rapidly.

“Removal of dental tartar on the visible surfaces of the teeth has little effect on a pet's health, and provides a false sense of accomplishment,” says the American Veterinary Dental College (AVDC) in a position statement opposing anesthesia-free cleanings.

Is Anesthesia Safe?

Although there is always some risk when using an anesthetic, it is much safer than in the past; the risks are controlled thanks to new, safer anesthetic drugs, careful dosing and administration, and constant monitoring of pets during and after anesthesia.

For your pet's safety, your veterinarian will run pre-anesthetic blood tests and will tailor the anesthesia plan based on those results and other factors such as your pet's age, weight and overall health.

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