



Dangers of Pet Dentistry Without Anesthesia

With more than 85 percent of pets over age 3 suffering from some sort of dental disease, veterinarians are constantly reminding clients to provide at home dental care for their pets. In addition, most veterinarians encourage annual dental exams and cleanings for their patients followed by care at home. Still, pet owners are reluctant to follow these recommendations.

Some people are actually leery of anesthetics used for dental procedures. In response to client concerns, some people have developed Anesthesia-Free Pet Dentistry (AFPD) protocols. Marketing brochures show calm dogs sitting on the laps of “pet dental hygienists” who gently scrape tartar off the pet’s teeth. For anyone who has a senior pet or anyone who has lost a pet under anesthetic, this idea might seem to be right on target.

In practice, however, there are several negative unintended consequences. While some dogs can be tolerant and will sit patiently, many have to be physically restrained, leading to stress and deep-seated fears.

Veterinarians use ultrasonic scalers and sharp dental instruments. This is one reason a general anesthetic is needed. Beyond keeping the patient from moving, heavy sedation or general anesthetic allows a more thorough procedure and proper visualization of the entire mouth and hard to see gingival areas.

Dr. Brett Beckman, a fellow in the American Veterinary Dental Society, says, “most nonprofessional dental cleanings are done using some sort of hand curette. These tools cause scarring and micro-pitting of the enamel surface and this can actually accelerate plaque retention and tartar buildup!”

In other words, this incomplete “cleaning” actually damages the tooth, causing plaque and tartar development to occur more rapidly in the future.

Dr. Beckman goes on to say “these procedures do much more harm than good. Pets that have had this done actually need to return for more frequent cleanings as a result of this enamel damage. This might be good for the business, but it is certainly not good for the pet.”

One elderly poodle patient presented to our practice after a pet store vaccine clinic. The person administering the vaccine and “flicked” the calculus off the teeth and caused the mandible infected with tooth root abscesses to fracture.

In a proper veterinary medical setting, dental cleanings are followed by a polishing step that helps remove the microscopic divots from the tooth enamel and creates a smooth healthy surface. Many veterinarians also apply a barrier sealant that helps repel plaque causing bacteria and has been shown to reduce plaque and tartar accumulation. Once professionally applied, this sealant can be maintained at home for better prevention.

Another serious issue with AFPD cleanings is that only visible portions of the teeth can be cleaned — usually only the outside surfaces. Areas under the gum line and on the insides of teeth will still have significant tartar and harbor the harmful bacteria. In time, the underlying bony structure of the jaw can deteriorate and the pet may lose teeth.

Under safe anesthetic, veterinarians are able to probe all areas of the mouth and use tools to remove plaque and bacteria from under the gum line. This actually stops the disease process. At the same time, dental x-rays can be done to help find potential problem areas. Even though more than 28 percent of dogs and 42 percent of cats have hidden dental disease, you won't find x-ray equipment at the anesthesia-free dental facility!

Finally, safety is also an issue with these non-professional cleanings. Even though many pets are patient and tolerant, there is the very real danger that the dog or cat will lash out in frustration or pain and bite someone. Lacerations of the pets' gums, hard pallet and even the lips are also possible.

If you know your pet needs a proper dental cleaning, but the thought of general anesthesia frightens you, talk with your veterinarian. While no anesthetic protocol is 100 percent safe, anesthetic complications are extremely rare. Allow your veterinarian to show you the monitoring equipment and explain how a well-trained staff makes anesthesia as safe as possible.

You can also reduce the need for dental cleanings by using dental home care products designed to remove plaque buildup in between the veterinary visits. The gold standard is to brush your pet's teeth daily. Use a soft-bristled toothbrush and a special dentifrice product designed for pets. You should never use human toothpaste.

Certain diets, like some Hill's products or Eukanuba Dental Defense, or dental chew products, like Greenies, can also reduce the amount of plaque for problem cases. Look for the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) Seal when choosing chew products for your pet.

Even the barrier sealant used at your veterinarian's office is available in a home version. Oravet by Merial can be applied on a weekly basis to help reinforce the product used at the time of your pet's dental cleaning.

Anesthesia free dentistry for pets might sound like a good idea, but the truth is the benefits are strictly cosmetic and there are serious medical and behavioral risks.

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