

# This Trendy Pet Dental Procedure May Do More Harm than Good

By Dr. Karen Becker



## Story at-a-glance

- Non-professional dental scaling (NPDS) for pets is becoming increasingly popular, however it is a purely cosmetic procedure that doesn't address any dental problems below the gum line.
- A truly thorough oral exam and cleaning can't be accomplished on a pet who is awake.
- Anesthesia is an important component to a thorough dental exam, and should be used for most dental procedures performed on your pet.
- Pet owners worried about putting their animals 'under' can arm themselves with the latest information and advice about safe veterinary anesthesia.
- At-home dental care is also very important to your pet's oral health.

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Nonprofessional dental scaling (NPDS), also known as anesthesia-free dentistry, is gaining popularity with an increasing number of dog and cat owners. These are well-meaning pet guardians who may be fearful of anesthesia or may not be able to afford professional

veterinary dental care. They want to provide some form of oral care for their pets, so they opt for NPDS.

However, anesthesia-free dentistry is essentially a cosmetic procedure that addresses only the parts of your pet's teeth you can see. The question many pet healthcare professionals are asking is whether NPDS procedures are doing more harm than good. One of the biggest concerns many veterinarians have with just scraping teeth is that the mouth is full of blood vessels, which can launch oral bacteria into the bloodstream. Once the bacteria is in the bloodstream it can infect other organs like the valves of the heart, resulting in a disease known as vegetative valvular endocarditis.

Read the American Veterinary Dental College's (AVDC) [position statement](#) on dental scaling without anesthesia.

## **Why Anesthesia is Used for Dental Procedures**

The fact is, a truly thorough oral exam and cleaning can't be accomplished on a pet that is awake. Anesthesia has several benefits when it comes to caring for your pet's mouth, including:

- Immobilizing your dog or cat to insure his safety and cooperation during a procedure he doesn't understand and is stressed about.
- Allows for a thorough exam of all the surfaces inside the mouth and the taking of x-rays.
- Allows for scaling below the gum line where periodontal disease is most active.
- Pain management.

A dog or cat who isn't sedated simply won't tolerate a thorough inspection of his mouth. He'll move around a lot, making the use of sharp instruments extra dangerous. Cleaning below the gum line of a fully alert animal is something that should never be attempted. Pets

won't stand for it because not only does the procedure cause tremendous stress, it's also extremely painful. And if tooth extractions are necessary, they are out of the question for un-anesthetized pets.

## **How Anesthesia-Free Dental Procedures Might Do More Harm than Good**

Non-professional dental scaling can potentially give pet owners a false sense of security about the state of their dog's or cat's oral health. Even though your pet's teeth – what you can see of them – may look clean and fresh after an anesthesia-free dental procedure, what you can't see is actually more important. Problems like tartar buildup below the gum line and gingivitis aren't addressed during a procedure that only scrapes and polishes the teeth. Most oral disease happens below the visible surfaces of your dog's or cat's mouth.

NPDS is an aesthetic procedure that doesn't deal with gum problems or other risks to your pet's overall health that can develop from disease that starts in the mouth. It doesn't allow for probing of the gums to look for the presence of deepening periodontal pockets or bone destruction resulting from gum disease.

The majority of older dogs that have undergone anesthesia-free dental procedures for years wind up with significant dental disease requiring multiple extractions as they age.

With all that said, there are certainly situations in which I remove plaque and tartar from a pet's teeth without using anesthesia. Each pet and situation is different. I don't do it in lieu of a thorough dental exam, and I don't do it on pets for which I have no dental history. But if, for example, I have a pet with a large chunk of tartar that is irritating his mouth, I'll remove that tartar without anesthesia if I can do it easily and without stressing out the patient.

## When Putting Your Pet 'Under' is a Concern

The prospect of making a beloved pet unconscious with anesthesia is a distressing worry for many people. If you are among them, Dr. Brett Beckman, writing for dvm360, offers this advice:

*Veterinary practices that routinely perform dental radiography and probing on all dental patients practice at an advanced level of care. They're also likely to be well-equipped to safely monitor patients and handle any problems they encounter.*

*Administration of premedications and nerve blocks enables patients to be kept at anesthetic depths consistent with that of a light general anesthesia. This keeps patients close to waking, even when extractions or other invasive procedures are needed, thus maximizing cardiac output and tissue perfusion and maintaining blood pressure.*