



**ANESTHESIA FREE
DENTISTRY
KNOW THE FACTS**



WHAT IS AN ANESTHESIA FREE DENTAL CLEANING?

In the United States and Canada, only licensed veterinarians can practice veterinary medicine. Veterinary medicine includes veterinary surgery, medicine and dentistry. Anyone providing dental services other than a licensed veterinarian, or a supervised and trained veterinary technician, is practicing veterinary medicine without a license and is subject to criminal charges.

This page addresses dental scaling procedures performed on pets without anesthesia, often by individuals untrained in veterinary dental techniques. Although the term Anesthesia-Free Dentistry has been used in this context, AVDC prefers to use the more accurate term Non-Professional Dental Scaling (NPDS) to describe this combination.

Owners of pets naturally are concerned when [anesthesia](#) is required for their pet. However, performing NPDS on an unanesthetized pet is inappropriate for the following reasons:

1. Dental tartar is firmly adhered to the surface of the teeth. Scaling to remove tartar is accomplished using ultrasonic and sonic power scalers, plus hand instruments that must have a sharp working edge to be used effectively. Even slight head movement by the patient could result in injury to the oral tissues of the patient, and the operator may be bitten when the patient reacts.

2. Professional dental scaling includes scaling the surfaces of the teeth both above and below the gingival margin (gum line), followed by dental polishing. The most critical part of a dental scaling procedure is scaling the tooth surfaces that are within the gingival pocket (the subgingival space between the gum and the root), where periodontal disease is active. Because the patient cooperates, dental scaling of human teeth performed by a professional trained in the procedures can be completed successfully without anesthesia. However, access to the subgingival area of every tooth is impossible in an unanesthetized canine or feline patient. 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. The effect is purely cosmetic.

3. Inhalation anesthesia using a cuffed endotracheal tube provides three important advantages... the cooperation of the patient with a procedure it does not understand, elimination of pain resulting from examination and treatment of affected dental tissues during the procedure, and protection of the airway and

lungs from accidental aspiration.

4. A complete oral examination, which is an important part of a professional dental scaling procedure, is not possible in an unanesthetized patient. The surfaces of the teeth facing the tongue cannot be examined, and areas of disease and discomfort are likely to be missed.

Safe use of an anesthetic or sedative in a dog or cat requires evaluation of the general health and size of the patient to determine the appropriate drug and dose, and continual monitoring of the patient.

Veterinarians are trained in all of these procedures. Prescribing or administering anesthetic or sedative drugs by a non-veterinarian can be very dangerous, and is illegal. Although [anesthesia](#) will never be 100% risk-free, modern anesthetic and patient evaluation techniques used in veterinary hospitals minimize the risks, and millions of dental scaling procedures are safely performed each year in veterinary hospitals.

For more information on why AVDC does not recommend Non-anesthetic (Anesthesia-free) Dentistry, click this link:

What is an Anesthesia Free Pet Dental Cleaning?

You might have heard about anesthesia free dental cleanings from a local groomer, pet store, word of mouth or even some veterinary providers. Commonly known as anesthesia free dental cleanings, the practice

involves scaling (scraping with an instrument) of a dog or cat's teeth without putting the pet under anesthesia.

Veterinarians often refer to the practice of scaling the teeth without anesthesia as non-anesthesia dental scaling (NAD or NADS), as the term "cleaning" is misleading to pet owners who have the impression that after one of these procedures, their pet's mouth is clean and healthy. It may sound like a great option, but what exactly does this procedure involve?

Nobody could expect a dog or cat to patiently sit like this through exam, cleaning, cleaning below gum line and radiographs.

First, the title of the procedure is accurate in that there is no anesthesia involved. This means your pet must be physically restrained, some at higher levels than others, in order for the provider to access the animal's teeth. A provider will often tell a pet owner it is just like a human going to the dentist, which is absolutely not the case. While some pets may appear to tolerate this restraint better than others, your pet is still being restrained for a lengthy period of time with no ability to understand why or what is happening to them.

How many people actually enjoy sitting in the dental chair, holding their mouth open while a dental hygienist scrapes mineralized tartar from their teeth? Imagine how a pet, who can't communicate, feels when the NAD provider holds open their mouth and attempts to do the same. We can understand what the dentist or hygienist is doing and can be asked to hold still and relax, but the pet does not understand and thus will frequently require a traumatic restraint process.

The next step is using a sharp instrument to remove plaque from the visible part of the tooth, or scaling the crown of the tooth.

The discoloration of your pet's teeth is essentially layers of plaque and bacteria that have built up over time, which is only eliminated from the visible portion of the tooth by using a sharp hand instrument called a scaler.

Consider your visits to the dentist and the minor scaling that sometimes has to be done to remove some of the tiny spots of plaque build-up. Now, take a look at your pet's teeth and think about how it might feel to have that amount of build-up scraped from your teeth. It certainly could cause a great deal of discomfort and pain to your pet.

At the end of the anesthesia free dental procedure, the outside surfaces of your pet's teeth may appear visibly whiter. However, there is much more than meets the eye. Because your pet wasn't under anesthesia, there was no ability to clean beneath the gumline where the bacteria that causes periodontal disease occurs and causes bad breath and extensive damage to tooth roots and supporting bone structure.

White teeth do not mean a clean and healthy mouth. This is the most unfortunate misconception by many loving pet owners, who don't realize the potential oral health problems that sit beneath their pet's gums.

Reasons not to Choose Anesthesia Free Dentals for Your Pet

After years of anesthesia free pet dentals, this dog had lost so much bone structure due to undetected periodontal disease the probe goes through the entire jaw.

Those that provide Anesthesia Free Dentistry or No Anesthesia Dentistry (NAD) would like you to believe by removing visible tartar from the teeth they are improving oral health. This is just not the case and the AVDC wants you to consider the following reasons not to choose an anesthesia free dental for your pet:

- Scaling (scraping surface of the tooth with an instrument) the plaque and tartar from the outside surfaces of the teeth does not remove the plaque and bacteria from beneath your pet's gumline and does not decrease the risk of your pet getting periodontal disease. Consider this, the same level of "gross" build up you see on your pet's teeth, is also thriving beneath their gumline where you can't see it or the damage it's doing. Cleaning and scaling below the gum line is most important because it's where periodontal disease is most active. This can't be done without anesthesia.**
- Anesthesia free dental cleanings require your pet to be restrained while the visible tartar is removed. In some cases this is stressful and painful. It is not fair to put your beloved dog or cat through the process without anesthesia.**
- There are few visible signs of periodontal infection before it has progressed too far to treat and save teeth. Anesthesia is needed to best evaluate periodontal disease with the help of a dental probe and x-ray examination to truly sense what is going on below the gumline.**

- **A thorough oral health exam can't be done on a dog or cat that is awake. During a thorough oral health exam, all surfaces of your pet's mouth are evaluated and radiographs are taken. This allows a veterinarian to identify painful problems including broken teeth, periodontal disease or even oral tumors. An oral health exam and x-rays can't be done on an awake pet.**
 - **Teeth that have been scaled and not polished are a prime breeding ground for more bacteria growth which perpetuates oral disease.**
 - **Anesthesia free dental cleanings provide no benefit to your pet and do not prevent periodontal disease at any level. In fact, it gives you a false sense of security as a pet owner that because the teeth look whiter that they are healthier.**
 - **The costs of anesthesia free dental cleanings are cheap to begin with. The ultimate costs to both your wallet, and pet's dental health, are far more of an expense.**
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What to Say to Groomers or Providers Who Offer You an Anesthesia Free Pet Dental Cleaning

We know that many people are offered this service by a groomer, pet store or even some veterinary practices. It can feel uncomfortable to say no to their suggestion of an anesthesia free dental, when you are accustomed to using their other services regularly.

First, it's important to remember that it's your pet's health that is of utmost importance. Here are a few ways you can respond so that you can move on quickly and not feel as though you need to defend yourself or get into a discussion that you don't have time for.

“No thank you. We utilize our veterinarian for all of our pet’s health needs.”

“Thank you, we noticed that our pet’s teeth are not looking good and their breath smells. We feel this is important enough to us that we’ll be taking them to our veterinarian for a comprehensive veterinary dental cleaning.”

“Our veterinarian provides a full dental cleaning and oral health exam that cleans beneath the gumline and will make sure that our pet is free from periodontal disease or other painful dental problems.”

But my groomer says anesthesia is dangerous for my pet and we can do this without that risk?

The risk of anesthesia is what providers mention as the main argument for an anesthesia free dentistry. In reality, the risks associated with anesthesia are extremely minimal. However, being that periodontal disease is the most common clinical condition in dogs and cats, your pet’s risk of periodontal disease is extremely high. At the point periodontal disease has developed, that treatment will require not only anesthesia, but often extensive surgery and teeth extractions.

Anesthesia is very safe. There are questions you can ask your veterinarian to learn more about their anesthesia protocol. You may want to tell your provider:

“We are comfortable with our veterinarian and know that anesthesia is required for my pet to get the proper level of dental care and a thorough oral health exam.”

My veterinarian offers Non-Anesthesia Dentals

Please remember the American Animal Hospital Association only certifies those veterinary hospitals who adhere to strict guidelines meant to assure pet owners their pet is receiving the highest level of care. One of these standards is that all dental cleanings and procedures are completed under anesthesia.

If your veterinarian offers a non-anesthesia dental, you might want to say you plan to call some area veterinarians who will provide a full cleaning under anesthesia, including dental x-rays, so you can be assured your pet's oral health is being thoroughly evaluated.