



Professional Dental Cleanings for Dogs Explained



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In a recent Reddit Ask Me Anything session, GREENIES™ brand hosted Dr. Thomas Hamilton, DVM (Dr. Tom), who addressed some of the most common concerns pet owners have about professional dental cleanings for their dogs. From anesthesia safety to cost considerations and the effectiveness of alternative cleaning methods, Dr. Tom provided candid, evidence-based guidance to help pet parents make informed decisions about their dogs' oral health.

Key Takeaways on Professional Dental Cleanings

Dr. Tom's comprehensive responses revealed several important principles for pet owners to consider:

1. **Professional cleanings are medical procedures, not cosmetic treatments:** The most important work happens below the gum line, where owners can't see
2. **Anesthesia enables proper care:** It's not just about safety for the veterinary team—it allows for complete evaluation, radiographs, and treatment that would be impossible and inhumane in an awake dog
3. **Anesthesia-free cleanings are not equivalent:** They may improve appearance but don't address underlying disease and can create false security
4. **Frequency should be individualized:** Not every dog needs annual cleanings, especially with excellent home care
5. **Home care matters:** Daily brushing and dental treats like GREENIES™ Dental Treats may help slow plaque and tartar accumulation between professional cleanings by slowing tartar buildup
6. **Cost reflects modern standards:** Today's prices include advanced monitoring, digital radiography, and comprehensive anesthetic protocols that significantly improve safety
7. **Communication is essential:** Pet owners should feel comfortable asking for detailed explanations and itemized estimates from their veterinarians

The Anesthesia Concern: Is Professional Cleaning Really Necessary?

One of the most frequent concerns Dr. Tom encounters is the apprehension many pet owners feel about putting their dogs under anesthesia for dental cleanings, particularly on an annual basis. One pet parent asked whether non-anesthesia cleanings, where dogs are swaddled, might be a good alternative.

Dr. Tom's response clarified an important distinction that many pet owners may not realize: "A professional dental procedure under anesthesia is not just a cosmetic deep cleaning. It is a medical procedure that allows your veterinarian to evaluate and treat what is happening both above and below the gum line."

The critical point is that most significant dental disease isn't visible on the surface. "A large portion of dental pathology lives under the gum line, where plaque and bacteria create infection around the tooth roots," Dr. Tom explained. "That is where periodontal disease causes pain, bone loss, loose teeth, and tooth root abscesses."

Under anesthesia, veterinarians can perform essential procedures that are impossible in an awake dog:

- Take dental radiographs to see below the gum line
- Measure periodontal pockets to assess disease severity
- Clean and polish properly, including subgingival areas
- Treat identified issues or perform necessary extractions

None of these critical procedures can be done accurately or humanely in an awake dog, no matter how cooperative they may seem.

Dental Disease's Impact Beyond the Mouth

Dr. Tom also stressed that dental health affects more than just the mouth. "Chronic infection and inflammation in the gums can affect overall health. The mouth naturally contains bacteria, and chronic periodontal inflammation has been associated with broader systemic health concerns. "

Over time, this chronic inflammatory burden has been associated with broader systemic inflammatory effects and overall health concerns. While direct causation may be difficult to prove in individual cases, keeping the mouth healthy reduces chronic infection and improves overall quality of life.

The Truth About Anesthesia Safety

Addressing the fear factor directly, Dr. Tom offered reassurance: "A good veterinary team takes anesthesia safety very seriously. We factor in the whole patient. Heart disease, metabolic disorders, and other conditions absolutely matter, and those are part of the risk assessment. But age by itself is not a disease."

He emphasized that many senior pets do very well under anesthesia when properly screened, monitored, and supported. The key is comprehensive pre-anesthetic evaluation and appropriate monitoring during the procedure.

Why Anesthesia-Free Cleanings Fall Short

When the topic of anesthesia-free cleanings came up, one Reddit commenter made a pointed comparison: "Respectfully, anesthesia free cleanings are a joke. It would be like you going to the dentist for them to use a toothbrush, in relative cleaning."

Dr. Tom approached this assessment with both empathy and medical clarity. While understanding that many owners pursue anesthesia-free cleanings out of legitimate concern for their pets rather than negligence, he confirmed that from a medical standpoint, "the comparison isn't far off."

He explained that while anesthesia-free cleanings can remove some surface buildup and may make teeth look better temporarily, they have significant limitations:

- They don't address areas where true dental disease develops (under the gum line)
- They don't allow for full dental evaluation
- They don't permit treatment under the gum line
- They don't include dental radiographs, which are essential for diagnosing periodontal disease

Dr. Tom noted that major veterinary organizations, including the AVMA, AAHA, and the American Veterinary Dental College, do not consider anesthesia-free cleanings to be a medical alternative to professional dental procedures. "In fact, standard of care and regulations in many areas have moved away from allowing non-anesthetized dental scaling outside of veterinary supervision, because it does not adequately treat disease and can raise animal welfare concerns."

Perhaps most concerning, anesthesia-free cleanings "can give owners a false sense of security because the mouth may look better while the underlying disease continues to progress."

Dr. Tom's goal in clarifying these differences isn't to criticize well-intentioned pet owners, but to help them "make informed decisions that best support their pet's long-term health and comfort" by understanding the difference between cosmetic cleaning and medical treatment.

Do Pets Really Need Professional Cleanings?

An interesting question came from a pet owner whose veterinarian's assessments seemed to vary between visits. Sometimes their dog and cat had tartar buildup, other times their teeth looked good, yet they'd never paid for professional cleaning. They used GREENIES™ treats regularly and wondered: do pets really need their teeth cleaned?

Dr. Tom's response provided important context about how dental health actually works. "Most dogs will accumulate some degree of tartar over time. Even with excellent home care, including brushing and dental treats, plaque forms daily and eventually hardens into tartar."

The goal of good dental hygiene isn't to prevent tartar formation forever, but rather "to slow how quickly it accumulates and reduce the progression of periodontal disease."

Understanding Variations in Dental Assessments

Dr. Tom acknowledged that dental grading can sometimes vary slightly between visits or veterinarians because oral exams with awake pets are point-in-time assessments that can be somewhat subjective. Factors affecting assessment include:

- Lighting conditions
- Patient cooperation
- How thoroughly the mouth can be examined

While mild differences in interpretation can occur, the overall picture should remain fairly consistent. Any dramatic shifts without clear progression would warrant closer discussion with your veterinarian.

The Role of Home Care vs. Professional Cleaning

Dr. Tom confirmed that pets do benefit from professional dental cleanings, but he also validated the pet owner's experience as an example of how dental care works in practice. "Brushing and dental treats like GREENIES™ Dental Treats may help reduce plaque accumulation and tartar accumulation, but they cannot remove tartar that is already firmly attached to the teeth or address disease under the gum line."

Professional cleanings allow veterinarians to fully evaluate and treat those hidden areas before they become painful problems. However, "consistent habits at home can help keep teeth healthy in between professional dental cleanings."

The goal is individualized care based on how quickly dental disease develops, not necessarily yearly procedures for every pet. Dr. Tom noted, "The good news is that not every dog needs a dental cleaning every year if we do the daily care work at home. The veterinary dental procedure is an important point in time reset, but the real maintenance happens in your at home oral care routine."

A Touching Side Note

The pet owner also shared that their older cat had recently passed, and at the end, the only food he would consistently eat was GREENIES treats—sometimes 12 a day. Dr. Tom responded with compassion: "That is a really touching story, and moments like that remind us that quality of life and comfort matter most at the end. Sometimes the rules shift during that stage, and if a pet finds joy and comfort in something they love, like their GREENIES treats, that becomes part of caring for them in a meaningful way."

He emphasized that at the end of life, "the focus shifts from prevention to quality of life, comfort, and happiness. Those moments matter more than strict adherence to guidelines."

Addressing Cost Concerns and Cleaning Frequency

Perhaps the most practical concern came from a pet owner in Alabama who noted that veterinary care has become expensive. They asked about recommended frequency for sedated cleanings, whether sedation is safe, and expressed concern about potential price gouging, wondering what constitutes a reasonable price range.

How Often Are Cleanings Needed?

Dr. Tom's answer acknowledged the complexity: "Most dogs do well with a sedated dental cleaning about once a year, but the real answer depends on how quickly that individual dog builds tartar and develops periodontal disease."

He noted that some dogs can safely go longer between cleanings, particularly larger breeds with naturally cleaner mouths. Crucially, "Your veterinarian should be recommending dental cleanings based on what they actually see in the mouth, not based on a fixed schedule."

The Necessity of Sedation

Reiterating the point about anesthesia, Dr. Tom explained: "Sedation or anesthesia is necessary to properly clean teeth. The disease we are treating lives under the gum line and

it would be painful and unsafe to address that in an awake animal. Modern anesthesia with monitoring is very safe for the vast majority of pets."

Understanding the Rising Costs

Addressing the financial concern directly, Dr. Tom acknowledged: "You are right that prices have climbed. In many areas now, dental cleanings commonly run \$1,000 to \$2,000 or more, especially when dental X-rays, anesthesia monitoring, lab work, and possible tooth extractions are included."

He confirmed that location does affect pricing, but explained that much of the cost increase reflects genuine improvements in care: "A big part of the increase comes from higher standards of care, better monitoring, staffing costs, and equipment that did not exist in general practice years ago."

Ensuring Transparency

For pet owners concerned about potential overcharging, Dr. Tom recommended: "Ask for an itemized estimate and have your vet explain what is included. Transparency is key. A good clinic should be comfortable walking you through exactly what you were paying for and why it benefits your pet."

He concluded with an important reminder about the bigger picture: "The goal is not frequent procedures. The goal is preventing painful dental disease while balancing safety, cost, and what is appropriate for your individual animal."

Dr. Tom's approach throughout the AMA balanced medical expertise with genuine empathy for pet owners' concerns. His guidance emphasizes that the goal of dental care isn't perfection or adherence to rigid protocols, but rather preventing painful disease while considering each pet's individual needs, health status, and their owner's realistic capabilities—both financial and practical.

For pet owners navigating decisions about professional dental cleanings, Dr. Tom's advice offers both reassurance and clarity: work with your veterinarian as a partner, maintain consistent home care, and understand that investing in proper dental procedures is an investment in your pet's overall health, comfort, and quality of life.



Meet Dr. Tom:

“As the Chief of Staff at Sturbridge Veterinary Hospital in Sturbridge, MA, I’ve spent the last nine years focusing on companion animal care, with a clinical focus on companion animal medicine, surgery, dentistry, and client education...and making veterinary medicine approachable for everyone. My journey into veterinary medicine started with a love for animals as a kid growing up on Long Island and was shaped by my education at UMass Amherst and St. George’s University (including clinical educational experiences affiliated with Cornell University). While I respect my early experience working with large animals, I’ve spent the last 9 years specializing in small-animal care for cats and dogs, which has always been my true passion.”

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