



Toothy Thomson Handout

Anesthesia Free or “Cosmetic” Cleanings

Cosmetic cleaning, also called anesthesia-free cleaning, is the removal of the visible calculus with hand instruments on an awake patient.

As a veterinary dentist, I recommend NO pet EVER have a cosmetic cleaning.

Cosmetic cleanings are marketed as offering pet parents a way to clean their pet's teeth without anesthesia. Unfortunately, this is purely cosmetic and gives pet parents a false sense of having helped their pet. This is because while the mouth may look better, a superficial or surface cleaning does *nothing* to address the diseased tissue(s) or the pain from periodontal disease.

In addition, these practices are dangerous for your pet; sharp instruments are being used on them awake and it can lead to trauma or injury with one slip from the staff or movement from your pet.

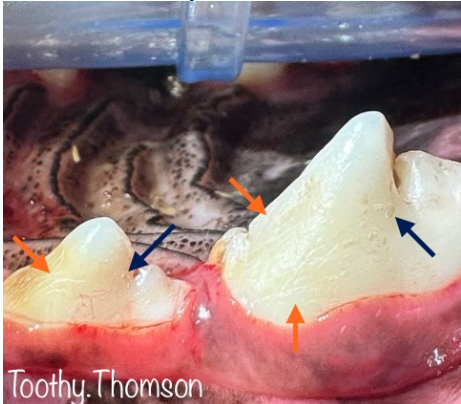
Anesthesia is the most commonly verbalized concern or fear by owners when discussing oral procedures and pet parents need to understand why anesthesia is necessary and why a cosmetic cleaning should never be done.

First, let's look at why anesthesia is necessary for teeth cleaning. For teeth cleaning to have health benefits, all the plaque and calculus above and below the gumline needs to be removed. It is not possible to safely and thoroughly clean below the gumline on an awake patient; it is also not possible to reach the inside surfaces of the teeth.



Calculus missed under the gumline (left) and along the inside/lingual surface (right)

Additionally, any tooth that is scaled, should also be followed by polishing. The process of polishing smooths out any micro etches made on the enamel by the scaling. Leaving micro etches leaves a roughened surface and gives plaque and calculus more surface area to attach. This will lead to easier mineralization of plaque into calculus if not polished.



Micro etches (orange arrows) and calculus (blue arrows); both missed during anesthesia-free cleaning

Secondly, teeth cleaning is not the only component of oral health for pets. A veterinarian and their team will perform a COHAT which stands for Comprehensive Oral Health Assessment and Treatment. This is a full tooth-by-tooth exam, dental radiographs of each tooth, cleaning above and below the gumline and polishing of the teeth; it allows for a full assessment of each tooth, staging of periodontal disease and making a treatment plan for each tooth.

The tooth-by-tooth exam is a visual exam of each tooth, as well as probing of the gingival pocket around the whole tooth; this way each tooth's health can be assessed and along with the radiograph interpretation, allows for appropriate staging. From there, the veterinarian can make a treatment plan for each tooth and take the appropriate steps to discuss your options and treat teeth as needed.

If only stage 1 disease is present then the cleaning above and below the gumline is the only needed treatment. In more advanced stages of periodontal disease, oral surgery will be recommended and should be performed as leaving diseased tissues and teeth in your pet's mouth will be painful.

Finally, anesthesia free cleanings are dangerous. If you think of what is asked of you at the dentist; laying back, keeping your mouth open, not moving... and you understand why this is being asked of you. Our pets do not know what is happening and have to be restrained. This can lead to oral trauma from a scaler with even a slight movement, up to and including other bodily injuries due to physical restraint.

The reality is that with the visible calculus removed, you will think that you helped, but removing some calculus and ignoring diseased tissue offers no health benefit.

Overall, it is impossible to fully clean a dog or a cat's teeth while they are awake. A COHAT with a veterinary team followed by daily oral home care is the only recommendation. And even if the option is a cosmetic cleaning or nothing; doing nothing is better because the risks of a cosmetic cleaning do not outweigh the benefits because there are no health benefits! A cosmetic cleaning will be stressful for your pet, it will not address any of the disease in your pet's mouth, and it will not lead to any diagnosis of any periodontal or endodontic concerns, but it will look good and make you believe you helped when you did not. Instead, talk to your veterinarian about a COHAT because anesthesia is necessary to clean your pet's teeth and more.

It is important to acknowledge that anesthesia is stressful and understanding why it is necessary, does not remove the fact that it is scary. Overall, anesthesia is not a benign treatment and therefore not risk-free. However, it is necessary for a COHAT and any oral surgery. The risks of anesthesia are almost always outweighed by the benefits of a COHAT with a veterinary team. Discussing these risks and your concerns before anesthesia with your veterinarian or veterinary specialist is important. Veterinary professionals

are aware that this is scary for pet parents but are also well equipped to answer your questions, explain the process and discuss what steps they and their team take to monitor your pet, minimize risks and what is done if concerns arise during anesthesia.

If your pet has any disease, most commonly heart or kidney, that increases their risk it is important to discuss it with your veterinarian. The risk of anesthesia should always be considered *with* the benefit of treatment as well as what can be done to decrease the anesthetic risk. If the risk is higher than you and your primary care veterinarian are comfortable with, referral to a dentist and an anesthesiologist should be discussed.

Veterinary anesthesiologists can administer anesthesia safely to even high-risk patients.

Costs quickly add up with pet ownership and we understand this is a factor in decision making. It is best to put money towards a COHAT or save for one rather than spending it on an anesthesia-free option.

Remember that pets are tough, most of them will not show any overt signs of oral pain. Our pets will continue to eat and play despite having a painful mouth or tooth. Their option is to have a sore tooth and eat or have a sore tooth and be hungry; they will eat.

Once the cause of oral pain is treated, whether you knew it was there or not, owners frequently report a positive change in their pet's overall attitude and energy. At the two-week post-op oral surgery recheck our team regularly hears “I did not realize they could have all this energy”. Every pet is different, but good oral health is important for our pets and it can only be achieved with COHATs*, followed by home care*. Anesthesia* is necessary for COHATs and although there are risks, they are almost always outweighed by the benefits of a COHAT.

*See related handouts



The images show asymmetrical calculus. There is more calculus on the left because the patient is choosing not to chew on that side. This is a sign of oral pain as the patient is still eating well but clearly favouring the left.

Cosmetic cleanings are not helpful in any way and are never recommended. They might be “anesthesia-free”, and thus remove all anesthesia risk, but they have no health benefits and therefore are not an alternative to a COHAT.

Your pet should have an annual COHAT with their veterinarian and if you have concerns about anesthesia it is important to discuss it with them.