

Your veterinarian's role in your pet's dental care

CVBC Animal Welfare Committee

Oral health is important to your pet's overall health and comfort. All pets should have their teeth and mouths examined at least once a year by a veterinarian. This is usually done as part of a regular examination, but should also be done if you notice a problem.

Signs that your pet needs to see the veterinarian for an oral examination:

- teeth that are loose, discoloured, broken, or covered in tartar
- bleeding or pus coming from the mouth
- excessive drooling or dropping food
- pain during eating or when the mouth area is touched
- growths or masses in the mouth
- bad breath
- loss of appetite

Services provided by veterinarians

Your veterinarian is trained to examine your pet's mouth and recommend further assessment of and treatment for any issues identified. This may include a full oral assessment, tooth cleaning (including below the gumline), dental x-rays, oral surgery including the extraction of diseased teeth, and other procedures.

All of these services require general anaesthesia and should only be performed by a licensed veterinarian (except scaling and polishing, which can be delegated to a trained staff member under a veterinarian's supervision).¹ If more advanced dental care is needed, your veterinarian may refer you to a board-certified veterinary dental specialist.

Non-professional dental scaling (NPDS), or "anaesthesia-free dentistry"

A proper cleaning of the teeth involves cleaning both above and below the gumline, and cannot be performed while your pet is awake. An NPDS may be advertised as "anaesthesia-free dentistry" or something similar. If you are considering having a groomer or other non-veterinarian perform an NPDS on your pet, please be aware of the following:

- Cleaning only the surfaces of the teeth above the gumline does not improve your pet's health and does not treat periodontal disease (disease of the tooth attachment structures), which is the primary reason veterinarians recommend dental cleaning above and below the gumline. Cleaning above the gumline is a purely cosmetic procedure.
- A thorough oral examination and x-rays cannot be performed while a pet is awake, and such procedures are in many cases essential for detecting painful conditions requiring treatment.
- General anaesthesia is very safe. Your veterinarian can answer all of your questions about the minimal risk involved.

- An NPDS involves scaling the teeth with sharp instruments, which means your pet will be uncomfortable and possibly in pain. Your pet will require physical restraint, which is stressful and could lead to injury of your pet or to the handlers.
- Veterinary dental specialists recommend that the use of dental scaling equipment (ultrasonic and hand instruments) be limited to anaesthetized patients under direct veterinary supervision.ⁱⁱ
- It is common for NPDS services to claim that, if a veterinary examination is needed, they will notify you after evaluating your pet’s mouth. However, serious problems are often missed. Personnel performing NPDS are not trained to examine your pet’s mouth or diagnose problems. Only veterinarians may legally perform these tasks.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Serious injuries to animals after NPDS have been reported in BC.^{iv}
- The College of Veterinarians of British Columbia (CVBC) has investigated multiple NPDS services over the years for misleading advertising and practicing veterinary medicine without a license. Some of these investigations have resulted in enforcement action, which are publicly available from the CVBC website under Resources and Unauthorized Practice (see [Unauthorized Practice – Enforcement Actions](#)).^{iii,v}

Although NPDS may appear less expensive in the short term, it is not a substitute for proper veterinary dental care and may be more costly in the long term. It provides a false sense of security that your pet’s oral health has been improved, but often it has not or has been made worse. The only way to safely and thoroughly improve your pet’s oral health is to have a veterinarian perform all dental services. For more information, please visit the American Veterinary Dental College website at <http://avdc.org/AFD/>. Please contact the CVBC at reception@cvbc.ca or 1-604-929-7090 with any current concerns.

What is the “duty to report” and how does it apply to dental concerns?

Your veterinarian has a duty to report any animal abuse to the BCSPCA, and this includes a refusal to treat severe dental disease. These occasions occur rarely, as there are often multiple treatment options for a dental condition; the important thing is that something is done to help the animal. Your veterinarian’s goal is always to partner with you to determine a treatment plan that works for you and your pet. Together you can work to ensure your pet has the best dental health possible.

ⁱ <http://www.canadianveterinarians.net/documents/veterinary-dentistry>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.avdc.org/statements.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.cvbc.ca/CVBC2/Resources/Unauthorized_Practice/CVBC2/Unauthorized_Practice.aspx?hkey=079225db-9c5d-42ee-84a8-ae2a1c66b724

^{iv} <http://infotel.ca/newsitem/broken-jaw-missing-teeth-what-you-need-to-know-before-getting-your-pets-teeth-cleaned/it18440>

^v <http://www.courts.gov.bc.ca/jdb-txt/sc/04/08/2004bcsc0807.htm>