

The Steps of a Professional Dental Cleaning

Prior to a professional dental cleaning, a trained veterinarian technician (technologist) takes the pet's history and the veterinarian does a complete physical examination to assess its health. The weight and temperature are recorded, and the pet's teeth, eyes, nose, throat, lungs, skin, musculoskeletal and nervous systems, and more are examined. Based on the physical exam findings and the procedures to be done, tests may be performed prior to the cleaning.

The anesthesia protocol is chosen based on what the veterinarian finds during the physical exam and the pet's needs in order to provide the least health risk and good pain control. While under anesthesia, intravenous fluids are used, and a trained veterinary technician or assistant monitors the pet. The pet is also kept warm throughout the procedure.



STEP 1: ORAL EXAM AND CHARTING UNDER ANESTHESIA

After the pet is under anesthesia, the veterinarian does a thorough oral exam, and the technician charts information on the pet's oral health for future reference. Two charts are used: The anesthetic chart is a record of which agents are used and the details of the anesthesia procedure. The dental chart is a record of the details of the oral examination, X-ray findings, and which treatments were performed.

STEP 2: INTRAORAL X-RAYS

Intraoral X-rays find what is happening in the bone hidden from our eyes. The roots of all teeth need to be X-rayed to help the veterinarian make a diagnosis and decide on the correct treatment. We cannot assume that dental disease is absent based on what we see above the gum line. X-rays are the most economical technology for diagnosing problems in the roots of the teeth and in the bone around the teeth.

Full-Mouth X-rays

When a professional dental cleaning is performed, full-mouth intraoral X-rays are done, which means taking X-rays of every tooth in the mouth. The crowns and all the roots of each tooth are X-rayed in order to evaluate their health. Abnormalities are identified and recorded, and a treatment plan for each tooth is determined. The full-mouth X-rays are also used to compare changes from year to year.

STEP 3: SCALING TEETH

This is the first step in the professional cleaning process that actually involves treatment. Scaling teeth removes tartar and plaque from the surface of the teeth above and below the gum line. If inflammation, bone loss, or deep pockets have developed around the teeth, these are painful, which is why anesthesia and pain control are needed.

STEP 4: POLISHING TEETH

After scaling, the teeth are polished. Polishing teeth removes any scratches due to scaling instruments and slows down the rate of attachment of bacteria to the crown.

STEP 5: SUBGINGIVAL IRRIGATION

Next, water irrigation under the gum line, which is called subgingival irrigation, is used to flush away all tartar and plaque from the sulci (pockets), around the teeth, and from the surrounding oral surfaces.

STEP 6: APPLICATION OF ANTIPLAQUE SUBSTANCES

Some veterinarians apply antiplaque substances to the teeth following dental scaling and polishing, and some apply fluoride gel or foam. Others do not feel this is necessary. A special wax that has been shown to slow down the accumulation of plaque is available in some countries and can be applied to the enamel surface. This is applied after the fluoride treatment.

STEP 7: PROBING THE SULCI

The veterinarian next probes the sulci, measures these in six areas around each tooth, and notes any abnormalities. A technician or assistant then records these measurements and any abnormal findings on the dental chart.

This step is done either after the teeth cleaning or, as in this case, before the teeth cleaning, depending on the preference of the veterinary dentist.

STEP 8: DETERMINING A TREATMENT PLAN

After the teeth and gums have been thoroughly cleaned, the veterinarian treats any disease or abnormalities as determined by exam findings, X-rays, and probing the sulci.

On completion of the above steps, the veterinarian has a much better idea of the health status of the pet and his or her mouth. Recommendations can then be made regarding further treatment, should this be necessary.