

Mountain Vista Veterinary Hospital

Veterinary Dentistry Q and A

This has been designed to address the many common questions and concerns that people have regarding the diagnosis and treatment of dental disease in their pets.

How is dental disease detected in our pets?

At our hospital, a very important part of your pet's routine physical exam is examining their mouth. We are able to identify issues such as retained baby teeth, broken teeth, inflamed gums and plaque and tartar build-up. Pet owners may also notice bad breath, drooling and decreased appetite or ability to chew. A **COHAT** may be then recommended to further evaluate and treat the disease.

What is a COHAT?

COHAT stands for **C**omprehensive **O**ral **H**ealth **A**ssessment and **T**reatment. In the past we called diagnosis and treatment of dental disease in our pets "dentals" but the veterinary dental community was concerned that the term "dental" was too vague to describe what we actually do to treat and prevent dental disease. Hence the acronym COHAT was born.

What is included in a COHAT at our hospital?

Pre-op physical and dental exam, pre-anesthetic blood testing, anesthesia and anesthesia monitoring, hypothermia management, dental probing and charting, full mouth dental x-rays and evaluation, cleaning above and below the gum line, tooth polishing, oral surgery (if required) including dental nerve blocks for pain control, tooth extraction, tumor removal or biopsy if needed. We will give an estimate based on the initial exam, but we will have a much better idea once your pet has come in and we have had a chance to probe the teeth and examine the dental x-rays. Appropriate pain medications and antibiotics will be prescribed as needed. All dental surgeries at our hospital include a PBMT laser treatment which aids in pain control and enhances healing. (see PBMT)

Why does my pet need a general anesthetic to perform a COHAT?

To safely and properly diagnose and treat dental disease your pet will require a general anesthetic so we can carefully examine all of the structures in the oral cavity. Much of the disease is below the gumline where we can not see so we need to use dental probing and x-rays to evaluate these tissues. This can not be accomplished in an awake pet. A general anesthetic also helps protect your pet's airways by using a cuffed endotracheal tube which delivers oxygen and decreases the chance of aspiration.

I am really concerned about giving my pet a general anesthetic to treat his/her dental disease.

This is a real concern for many pet owners and sometimes prevents a pet from getting the proper care needed. General anesthesia is required to treat many pet problems including tumors, urinary bladder stones, foreign body removals and organ biopsies to name a few. Treating dental disease is no different. The anesthetics we use allow our pets to metabolize and wake up quickly and are much safer than were used in the past. Pre-operative screening such as listening to the heart, performing blood testing and other tests such as heart ultrasound, ECG and/or chest x-rays (if warranted) allow us to assess your pet's risk for anesthetic complications prior to giving an anesthetic. While under anesthesia your pet is constantly monitored for heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, oxygen levels and temperature so any problems can be detected and dealt with immediately. An IV catheter and IV fluids are administered to all of our patients in order to help maintain BP and provide us easy access of medications should they require them. There is always some risk when undergoing an anesthetic as not all complications can be predicted but these types of problems are extremely rare. Your pet is far more likely to suffer from the ramifications of an unhealthy mouth than to have a problem from the anesthesia.

My pet is too old to go under anesthesia

Although it is true that as a pet ages, they are at an increased risk for developing chronic disease, your pet's current health status is more important than age in predicting an anesthetic complication. Pre-op screening such as blood work and other diagnostics (ECG, ultrasound, chest rads etc.) help us assess their risk status. Proper dental care is important to increase the comfort levels in our senior pets and will help prevent the chances developing kidney, liver and heart disease or making pre-existing disease worse.

My pet has a heart murmur. Is general anesthesia safe?

Heart murmurs or abnormal heart sounds, are very common in aging pets however some patients can have a heart murmur from birth. A heart murmur usually indicates there is an abnormality in the heart which is usually structural like a leaky heart valve or a narrowing of a blood vessel. Sometimes heart murmurs are classified as physiologic or innocent and occur for reasons other than heart disease. It is often not possible to determine if a heart murmur is significant by just listening to the heart alone. For this reason, a test called an echocardiogram which is a special type of heart ultrasound, is recommended to determine the cause of the heart murmur and to assess any risk. MANY pets with heart murmurs can undergo anesthesia and a COHAT with little risk. The key is to have pre-op heart testing to properly diagnose the cause of the heart murmur. We are very fortunate to have veterinarian on staff that can perform this type of testing. Depending on what is found, further tests such an ECG and a heart/lung x-ray may be recommended. We are also able to consult and send images to a veterinary cardiology specialist via telemedicine if needed.

Why does my pet get dental x-rays when in for a COHAT?

Because 2/3rds of your pet's dental structures are located under the gum line where we can not see, serious dental problems can easily be missed if dental x-rays are not performed. Bone loss, tooth resorption and root abscesses are all sources of dental pain and can sometimes only be detected through dental x-rays. If dental x-rays are not performed, important issues will be missed and this defeats the purpose of performing a COHAT in the first place. *(please note: it is not a requirement under CVO licensing to have a dental x-ray machine or to perform full mouth dental radiographs for dental procedures. Some veterinary hospitals do not have this technology at all. It is always import to ask if dental x-rays will be performed when enquiring about dental procedures. We have been performing full mouth dental x-rays with every dental procedure for many years and routinely find problems under the gum line that could not be diagnosed otherwise.)*

What will happen if I don't get treatment for my pet's dental disease as recommended by my veterinarian?

Dental tartar and plaque harbours bacteria in the mouth that constantly showers your pet's body. This bacteria can potentially cause harm to your pet's internal organs including the kidney, liver and heart valves. As the disease progresses, the structures holding your pet's teeth in place become weakened. This leads to bone loss, tooth mobility, tooth loss and oral pain.

A COHAT has been recommended for my pet, but my pet seems fine as he/she is still eating and drinking?

A very common misconception is that our pets are eating well so we can assume that they are not in pain. This is absolutely false. Pain from dental disease will often not influence our pet's eating patterns as they are innately programmed to eat for survival. Our pets learn to compensate for the pain and sadly many learn to live with the chronic pain in their mouths.

I really only want my pet's teeth cleaned and do not think it is necessary to have dental x-rays or teeth removed.

Just superficially cleaning your pet's teeth without assessing the health of their teeth and addressing disease at the time of the procedure is like performing an appendectomy (appendix removal) but leaving half of it in place. A superficial cleaning alone will do nothing to promote your pet's health and will potentially put your pet at risk for experiencing ongoing pain and infection.

I really do not like the idea that my pet may need to have his/her tooth (teeth) extracted as they need their teeth to eat properly.

Pet owners are often very concerned when it is recommended that a tooth or teeth need to be extracted when they are found to be diseased. A diseased tooth is not doing your pet any good and is a source of pain and infection. Animals adapt very well to eating when

teeth have been extracted. Because our pets have been domesticated, we can offer them a variety of diets to suit their needs as they do not rely on their teeth to hunt for prey.

Will my pet be painful after having a tooth (teeth) extracted?

At MVVH pain control in patients is our main priority. We use modern techniques to control pain and use a multi-modal approach in all our patients. We are proud members of the International Veterinary Academy of Pain Management IVAPM. Injectable medications, dental nerve blocks and at-home medications in the recovery period are routinely used in our dental patients. All post-surgical dental patients undergo a PBMT laser treatment to aid in healing and decrease pain and inflammation in the mouth.

What is PBMT laser therapy?

PBMT stands for photobiomodulation therapy and uses infra-red light to help energize your pet's cells. Also commonly referred to as "laser therapy" or "cold laser", PBMT is a drug-free, side-effect free treatment that has been scientifically proven to be successful in treating post-surgical pain and many acute and chronic conditions.

I feed my pet dry food, so he/she shouldn't ever need a COHAT?

Food that encourages chewing may help with some of the superficial tartar and calculus however feeding your pet kibble does not mean that they will never need a COHAT as dental disease often involves the structures under the gum line.

I give my pet bones to chew on so he/she shouldn't need a COHAT?

Chewing hard objects such as cooked or boiled bones is not recommended for our pets as these can actually cause premature wearing down of teeth and tooth fractures. Chewing on bones does not prevent dental disease and may actually cause problems in our pets.

I use dental treats, liquids or powders that treat dental disease so my pet does not need a COHAT?

There are many products on the market that claim to prevent or treat dental disease. Unfortunately nothing is a substitute for a COHAT as these products only target the structures outside of the gum line. You may see decreased tartar build-up on the tip of the tooth however there still can be disease unseen under the gum line. Some of these products are very helpful after your pet has had a COHAT and can help pet owners with the home care of their pet's teeth.

My groomer performs a "dental" when my pet is groomed so he/she should not need a COHAT?

True dental procedures in our pets require the utilization of proper dental cleaning equipment which targets structures above and below the gum line. Professional dental care can only be performed legally under the guidance of a veterinarian and anyone attempting to perform dental procedures who is not a veterinarian can be charged with practicing veterinary medicine without a license. Some groomers may brush a pet's teeth

while they are being groomed however this will not treat existing dental disease and dental brushing needs to be performed on a regular basis in order for it to be effective.

I have heard about “anesthetic-free” dental cleanings - are they safe?

Anesthetic-free dental cleanings are advertised from time to time in a variety of places. They are promoted as a safe alternative to dental care because the patient is not placed under anesthesia. Patients are restrained and sharp dental tools are used in the patient while they are awake. Only superficial tartar can be removed and anything below the gumline can not be legally dealt with. It is often a non-veterinary professional who will offer this type of service who are not regulated by any type of governing body to ensure quality, safety and sterility. Furthermore, important issues below the gumline are never diagnosed or treated and abscessed and diseased teeth are left in which results in chronic pain for the patient. Because the airway is not protected, chunks of tartar which harbour bacteria can be aspirated. We can't ask a dog or cat to spit in a cup! Board certified veterinary specialists agree that anesthetic-free dental cleanings are dangerous and do not properly address dental disease. We do not recommend veterinary patients to undergo this type of procedure.

My pet just had a dental procedure last year and now you are recommending to have it done again?

Many pets, especially those breeds that may be prone to dental disease, will require more than one COHAT in their lifetime. At home dental care is also vital in helping to keep your pet's teeth clean and healthy after a COHAT is performed. Our veterinary dental health team will help design a home care program that is right for you and your pet.

My pet seems to have two sets of teeth. What does this mean?

Our pets are born with a set of baby teeth or “deciduous” teeth that generally fall out between 4-6 months of age as their adult teeth come in. Sometimes the baby teeth and the adult teeth are present at the same time. Your pet should never have a baby tooth and adult tooth present at the same time as the baby tooth will not allow the adult tooth to come through into its proper position. This can lead to malocclusion, discomfort and premature dental disease. Any retained baby teeth should be removed when detected to prevent serious dental problems.

Can I do things at home to help keep my pet's teeth healthy?

Absolutely! The success of a good dental health program is largely dependent on the dental care that you can provide at home. Daily tooth brushing is the single most important thing that you can do to help maintain your pet's oral dental health (like us!) Starting while your pet is young will help get them used to dental brushing. There are several other things that can be done to help keep your pet's teeth healthy. We can discuss these options with you as many pets have different personalities and dental requirements.

What are feline resorptive lesions?

Resorptive lesions are defects in the tooth that cause tiny holes in the teeth leading to severe oral pain. Although these lesions can also be seen in dogs, they are most commonly recognized in cats. Resorptive lesions can sometimes be seen on visual exam of your cats's teeth and look like defects in the enamel or gum tissue growing into the tooth. Touching these lesions with a cotton tip usually causes the pet to show a pain response. Many resorptive lesions are not detected however until the pet is under anesthesia and the teeth are probed or x-rays taken. The cause of resorptive lesions are unknown. Treatment involves extracting affected teeth as the disease is progressive and very painful. Resorptive lesions can often be missed by pet owners as many pets will continue to eat with oral pain.

What is chronic stomatitis-gingivitis?

This is a disease that is recognized in cats in which the tissues surrounding the teeth, the gums and tissues of the oral cavity become severely inflamed and painful. It is a chronic condition in which a cure is often difficult to obtain. The exact cause of the disease is unknown. Treatment involves strict oral hygiene as even the smallest amount of dental plaque can cause severe irritation. Many pets benefit from whole mouth tooth extraction especially if the disease is diagnosed in the early stages. PBMT laser therapy may also be beneficial in patients with this condition.

Why does pet dental care seem so expensive?

Unlike humans, all of our pet's require a general anesthesia to properly diagnose and treat dental disease. We strive to provide the safest environment possible for your pet while under anesthesia. Much of the cost includes the costs of running the pre-op blood tests, giving the anesthesia and using the specialized monitoring and dental equipment that had been purchased by the hospital to allow dental treatment. Our COHAT's also involve a minimum of three trained staff members including the veterinarian in order to take x-rays, monitor anesthesia and provide dental cleaning and surgery. Using properly sterilized instruments, suture material and disposable dental burs also add to the costs. Antibiotics and pain medications are also often needed and all dental surgical patients have a PBMT laser treatment at our hospital to help treat pain and inflammation and to enhance the healing process.

Can you give an estimate to perform a COHAT?

Absolutely! We are able to give pet owners a baseline estimate after we have performed a physical exam and looked into your pet's mouth. This way we can determine if any special pre-op testing is required or address any concerns before performing the procedure. Sometimes we can determine if tooth extraction will be required before going into the mouth, but often further problems cannot be detected until we have your pet anesthetized and dental x-rays taken. For this reason, we may provide a range estimate for you as dental surgery may be required using more equipment and taking a longer time than predicted. We always give owners the option of being contacted prior to commencing with surgery if unforeseen problems are detected so a contact number is vital when your pet is in for the procedure.

