

## Basic Equine Dental Care

Horses' teeth grow continuously all of their lives, especially in the early years. They are also constantly being worn down due to the grinding action horses use to chew their feed. The wild horse has a natural diet of grasses and shrubs that is a combination of "chewier" and softer, and a horse living on natural grass will be more likely to polish off the surfaces of his molars into a fairly even level. So the dental apparatus of the horse is fairly well adapted to his natural diet.

Domestic horses usually have some kind of grain or "hard feed" in their diet which is harder and smaller resulting in uneven wear.

The shape of the jaw of a horse's jaw can also cause problems. The upper jaw is wider than the lower jaw so the molars don't sit directly over each other. The outside edges of the upper molars and the inside edges of the lower molars don't get ground down at the same rate as the rest of the teeth and become very sharp. Raised edges may appear along the edges of the molars - typically along the outside of the upper set and the inside of the lower set.

These edges can be quite razor-like, actually cutting deep into one's finger when rubbed across them while inspecting the mouth. They often cut into the horse's cheeks when they chew and cause soreness where a bit or halter pushes the cheek against a sharp tooth. In some cases a horse may have to chew unnaturally in an attempt to grind up his food. This action can often result in increased uneven wear on the teeth and in some cases generate significant excess pressure on one or more tooth which can result in serious complications.

Horses then cannot grind their food well and in addition to they will be in discomfort, as well as probably lacking in nutritional efficiency. As these conditions develop the horse's teeth must be once again made level through use of a dental rasp. This process is called "floating," the purpose of which is to rasp off the excess tooth material in order to create a level "table" for the molars to come together. It's not the dentist's intent to make the teeth completely flat. They need some irregularity in order for the horse to grind his food, but the overall surface where the rows of teeth meet must be reasonably level in order to allow proper jaw movement.

In the case of a missing tooth, the opposing tooth will grow into the space where the missing one should be, causing some problems. The long tooth should be cut or filed to be the same length as the others.



Some horses will also have wolf teeth. These are small premolars which appear on the upper jaw above and usually slightly ahead of the molars. These teeth are particularly troublesome as they are not set in the jawbone and the presence of a bit pressing against them can cause significant gum discomfort. If they are present, they should be removed by a veterinarian or equine dentist.

### Signs and symptoms

Your horse may already be showing signs of dental problems. Some of the Signs are:

- weight loss
- excessive salivation
- slow and labored eating
- dropping bits of half chewed food
- unusually coarse manure

Symptoms may include:

- fussing with the bit
- avoidance of bit contact
- irritation when put into a dropped noseband
- head tucking or head tossing
- not wanting to have his face and muzzle handled

Sometimes unexplained colics which have no apparent cause can be traced back to dental problems.

Additionally, young horses will often experience discomfort when shedding their deciduous (baby) teeth or caps and lumps will often appear under the jawbones while the new teeth are trying to erupt, and they may need assistance to remove them.

Most equine dentistry involves prevention. If your horse's teeth are regularly cared for, the maintenance process will not be overwhelming and you should be able to avoid most dental or health complications. Depending on your horse's age, diet, hardness of teeth and jaw alignment, he may need attention from every 4-6mths to perhaps years between floating. Your Equine Vet or Equine Dentist will advise you how quickly your horse's dental surfaces are changing and what to look for before complications arise.