

EQUINE DENTISTRY

One of the most commonly asked questions to the equine veterinarian is “why do my horse’s teeth need to be floated?” The answer is relatively simple — their teeth continually erupt over time to compensate for the loss of tooth from grinding feed, with the upper jaw slightly wider than the lower jaw for a circular chewing action. This creates a slope on the grinding surface of the teeth that can cause sharp edges to form on the outside of the upper teeth (irritating the cheeks) and on the inside of the lower teeth (irritating the tongue). “Floating” is a term used to describe rasping and smoothing these points and edges. With the aid of advanced training and instrumentation, the quality of equine dental care has greatly improved to the benefit of both the horse and rider.

Recommendations vary for frequency of dental care. Depending upon the age of the horse and the conformation of the mouth and teeth. Annual dental checks should be done starting just after birth with the post-foaling exam (some dental problems are congenital). Many dental abnormalities, if caught early enough, can be corrected or managed by starting treatment in the young horse.

Younger horses may also need more visits due to erupting teeth and removal of caps (deciduous teeth). The goal with young horses is to prevent major problems from developing by maintaining a healthy bite. Retained caps in horses up to five years of age need to be removed. They can interfere with normal permanent tooth eruption, and can cause significant oral pain when eating feed or during training with the bit.

Wolf teeth are very small vestigial teeth located in front of the first upper cheek teeth that can cause problems with pressure from the bit. The bit may cause the cheeks to come into contact with the often sharp edge of the wolf teeth, and the horse may respond with head tossing or poor head carriage. Wolf teeth often erupt in yearlings and are commonly removed prior to training.

Abnormalities can be found during a thorough dental exam that may require further work, for example:

- An overbite or under bite may cause large hooks to form on the cheek teeth that may need to be drilled down.
- Crooked or overgrown incisor teeth may require realignment — this can interfere with normal grinding of feed between the cheek teeth arcades.
- Retained caps (deciduous teeth in young horses (five years or younger) need to be removed — they can interfere with normal permanent tooth eruption.
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Some mature horses require more frequent work depending on malformations, missing teeth, or misalignments. Types of feed also effect the frequency of care. A diet higher in grains and pellets will cause the formation of sharp edges faster than a diet high in roughage, i.e.; a horse out on pasture with hay. The longer the fiber in the feed, the wider the circular grinding motion on the surface of the teeth, hence fewer sharp edges formed on the teeth.

A common procedure for performance horses is putting in bit seats, which involves rounding the forward end of the first upper and lower cheek teeth so there is minimal contact of the cheeks and these teeth when the bit is in the mouth. Canine teeth are also reduced in size to avoid any irritation on the sides of the tongue and to prevent cuts on the fingers of the rider while biting the horse or during examination of the mouth.

Many dental problems develop over a period of several years, and older horses with poor previous dental care may need significant treatment. Poor alignment of the cheek teeth can cause an overbite or an underbite resulting in large hooks that need to be drilled down or removed by a chisel. Crooked or overgrown incisor teeth can frequently lead to overbite problems and require alignment by drilling and reducing the length of the teeth. Long incisor teeth can interfere with the normal grinding of feed between the cheek teeth arcades. This can be assessed by checking the lateral excursion (i.e. checking the degree of contact between the upper and lower molars.) If there is poor contact between the grinding teeth, the incisors need to be reduced in length. This may also lead to quidding. Quidding is the process where grass or hay is rolled into cigar-shaped wads and packed between the cheek and teeth or dropped onto the ground because the horse cannot adequately grind the feed enough to swallow it.

In middle aged and older horses, more severe problems that may need treatment include long or tall teeth that create a wave or step mouth, or infected, loose or misshapen teeth that require extraction (removal).

Significant problems are usually present before a horse will show obvious signs of pain from the teeth. Any changes in the horse's chewing patterns, such as a slower eating rate, dribbling feed, or tilting the head while eating, are commonly seen with dental pain. More severe problems may lead to swelling of the lower jaw or face, weight loss, weight loss, nasal discharge, halitosis, or refusal to eat. Remember to have your veterinarian examine your horse's mouth regularly to diagnose any problems early!