



Quality and Concern in Equine Practice
Serving Colorado Springs and Southern Colorado

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EQUINE DENTISTRY

Does your horse drop food when eating? Throw his head when riding? Has your horse lost weight? Well, its time to talk about equine dentistry . . .

It is very important to include a complete oral and dental exam as part of the general physical exam each time a horse is seen by the veterinarian. Keeping your dental schedule consistent and frequent, you can ensure that your horse retains his teeth up to 5 years longer than horses that do not have regular dental care.

WEANLING DENTISTRY (Birth to 18 months)

Dental check-up for foals are both necessary and helpful. Horses of this age should be examined for any congenital defects and evaluated for proper eruption sequence and alignment of incisors. A newborn foal should have his teeth checked for abnormalities that may interfere with nursing. Most dental malocclusions can be corrected or at least not allowed to worsen as the foal grows by simply floating the premolars to prevent hooks from forming, leveling, and shortening the incisors to prevent jaw locking.

YOUNG PERFORMANCE HORSE DENTISTRY (18 months to 3 years)

Young horses are asked to begin responding to a bit at the time when their mouths are most actively changing. A dental exam prior to starting a youngster in training is of great benefit. During this 3-year period, all of the deciduous teeth (baby teeth) are shed and 36 to 44 permanent teeth erupt. Teeth, lip and mouth pain make it difficult for a horse trying to learn cues from a bit. Wolf teeth can also cause biting problems and should be removed before the horse is bitted.

All young horses should have biannual oral examinations. Horses that are shedding caps may need to be seen more often.

ADULT PERFORMANCE DENTISTRY (4-10 years)

The adult horse should have a full set of permanent teeth. Most horses this age have already been exposed to training and biting. Most problems are easy to correct and manage during this time of a horse's life. This age group should have annual dental examinations. The teeth need floating and the

edge of the cheek teeth should be rounded to create a bit seat. Hooks should be removed.

MATURE HORSE DENTISTRY

(10-18 years)

Abnormalities of wear can become a significant problem in horses of this age group. Annual dental exams are the rule but some horses with abnormalities may benefit from more frequent attention. As older upper molars begin to suffer from wear, a "wave" mouth may form requiring more extensive correction. In middle-aged stallions and geldings, the canine teeth can become weapons. Prominent canine teeth can also reduce the tongue space causing excessive tongue pressure when bitted.

GERIATRIC HORSE DENTISTRY

(18 years and older)

Most old horses suffer from some form of dental disease due to the accumulating effect throughout life. Abnormal wear problems become more pronounced and require frequent oral examinations and dental maintenance to keep their mouths healthy. Because teeth have lost their sharp enamel edges, chewing and digestion of food becomes more difficult and less efficient. Most older horses need to have their diet adjusted to reduce the amount of rough forage that can predispose a horse to choke or impaction colic. Corrective procedures including floating and balancing need to continue as long as the horse has teeth.

A critical part of dental care is keeping the teeth even in length.

Maintaining an even bite plane is important to ensure a level grinding surface. If an even bite plane is neglected, it may be impossible to achieve alignment when the horse is older.

Checking for Dental Problems

Check to see if a horse's teeth are sore by using the heel of your hand to gently push into the muscle located three inches below and just in front of the eye. The horse will flinch and jerk its head upward if this area is tender or inflamed. Because some horses adapt to discomfort and pain, it is also important to look for these other signs of dental problems:

- Excessive salivation and loss of feed from the mouth while eating, or difficulty chewing.
- Loss of body weight and general condition.
- Noticeable undigested feed particles (long stems or whole grain) in manure.
- Fighting the bit, excessive head tossing, bit chewing, tongue lolling, or resistance to being bridled.
- General poor performance, failing to turn or stop, even bucking.
- Foul odor from one or both nostrils.
- Traces of blood from the mouth.
- Nasal discharge or swelling of the face, jaw, or mouth tissues.