

Equine Dentists

Man has taken the horse out of his natural habitat and, not only placed him in an enclosed space, but changed his feeding patterns. In the wild, horses eat a greater mixture of coarser grasses and forage than they are provided with in a domestic situation and a horse's teeth were designed to graze for 16-18 hours a day.

Grass contains silica, the building block for glass, and so is a fairly abrasive foodstuff. Processed feeds, such as concentrates and even hay, are relatively soft and so the horse's teeth don't get such a good workout. Tooth eruption occurs when the teeth enter the mouth and become visible. The regular pressure of chewing on grass in the natural habitat helps the body regulate the rate at which teeth erupt.



Most of the horse's diet is now processed and there are few horses that graze outside for more than 12 hours per day. As a result, horses develop dental problems as their teeth are not worn down consistently by the natural grazing process, which can result in the development of sharp enamel points and protuberant teeth that may lead to problems when feeding and being ridden.

How horses chew

The normal adult horse has at least 36 teeth, of which six are upper incisors and six lower incisors. There are three pre-molars and three permanent molars (also known as cheek teeth) and the horse may also have up to four wolf teeth and/or canines.

Normal chewing involves firstly tearing off grass with the incisors (front teeth) and then passing the wad of food back to the molars with the tongue. The horse doesn't chew up and down like a human but in a sideways circular motion to maximise grinding on the cheek teeth surfaces.

Methodical chewing thoroughly mixes saliva with the food to form a 'bolus', which is steadily passed backward down the cheek teeth 'battery' to be swallowed. Then the horse lowers his head again ready to take the next bite. This may be chewed on either the right or left side - only one side is usually used per mouthful. The perfect horse will use both sides evenly but often like us horses prefer to chew on one side. This can be through discomfort or plain preference and can lead to problems.

Why do horses need dental check-ups?

Horses need regular dental examinations from birth onward. Foals and young horses should be checked to ensure their teeth are formed correctly and their bite is sound, etc. As the horse grows the dental evaluation will ensure that their baby teeth are being replaced with the adult teeth; that there are no 'left over' teeth that are in the way of chewing, biting, or the 'bit seat'. Once the horse is fully mature, the dental evaluation will ensure that the horse does not develop sharp teeth; broken teeth, or even decayed teeth.



It's important that the angles and lengths of the teeth match so that your horse is comfortable and can chew correctly. Fed on processed feeds, horses no longer use their front teeth as much and their incisors can get longer relative to their cheek teeth, preventing proper occlusion (meeting) of the back grinders.

This can cause big problems for the horse, which can manifest themselves in a variety of different ways and can lead to serious conditions such as weight loss and colic. Regular dental checks - ideally twice a year - are just as important for the domestic horse as they are for humans and are vital to keep your horse happy and healthy.

What does the equine dentist do?

The equine dentist carries a selection of instruments including:

- A speculum-a shiny polished metal device that holds the horse's mouth open and acts as a mirror to enable clear examination
- A head torch for the dentist to shine in the horse's mouth if necessary for better visibility while keeping hands free
- A selection of rasps
- Syringes to wash out the mouth
- Anti-bacterial mouthwash
- Dental charts to record diagnoses and treatment

Equine dentists spend an average 45 minutes examining and assessing the horse's mouth. During routine examination they will:

- Ask the owner/handler if the horse has shown any changes in eating habits or behaviour
- Examine teeth and gums to identify symmetry/signs of disease/abnormal wear
- Rasp rough edges found on teeth
- Round off the 'bit seat' to improve the comfort of the horse when the bit is in his mouth and assist food flow

Equine dentists are not always trained veterinarians. Some horses, like people, become very nervous when examined or treated by a dentist and require sedation. If a horse needs to be sedated a qualified vet must administer the sedative. Horse dentists are not permitted to carry out acts of veterinary surgery but there are clinics and practices that specialise in equine dentistry.

Recognise the signs

Signs that your horse may have dental problems include:

- awkward head position or difficulty in keeping the horse 'on the bit'
- heavy contact or leaning when being ridden
- head tossing
- difficulty turning one way when being ridden
- reluctance to go forward into the hand when being ridden
- difficulty in putting on the bridle
- unable to move lower jaw sideways
- sores at corner or within mouth
- cheeks sensitive when you press them against teeth
- rearing or bolting
- failure to gain condition
- weight loss
- long fibres found in droppings
- bad breath from mouth or nostrils
- bolting of feed
- spits out partly chewed wads of hay
- dunking hay in water
- dribbling feed from mouth
- excess drooling
- miserable persona
- bumps on the lower jaw or enlargements elsewhere on skull
- draining abscesses anywhere on the head
- discharge from the eye or nose
- the horse is between two and five years old ie. shedding caps
- the horse is older than 20 ie. he may have loose or expired teeth causing pain



A list of qualified equine dentists is available from the British Association of Equine Dental Technicians website at <http://www.equinedentistry.org.uk/>