

Health and welfare information about your horse from Vetlexicon Equis.



Dental care

Equine dental care is often neglected. As humans we are always off to the dentists for our 6 month check-ups. Horses are just like us, they can get toothache, cavities and gum disease. So, why shouldn't your horse get regular check-ups too? Knowing what goes on in your horse's mouth will help you prevent any discomfort for your horse.

What is there to know?

It's the same old story... no teeth, no horse. Your horse's teeth are the result of millions of years of evolutionary change. The horse has adapted to the changing environment over the years resulting in a grazing animal. Their teeth have developed to cope with a grass diet - front teeth (incisors) for cutting the grass and back teeth (cheek teeth) for chewing. Their teeth have a high resistance to wear and tear and have irregular surfaces for the continuous grinding motion eating involves. Your horse needs regular check-ups to make sure the teeth are wearing down properly.

Domesticated horses find themselves in conditions very different to those in the wild. These conditions affect the growth and wear of the teeth. Domestication, change in diet and using a bit, alter the way your horse lives, eats and moves which has a significant effect on the teeth.

What do my horse's teeth look like?

This picture shows the position of your horse's teeth in the mouth...



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How often should the vet check my horse's teeth?

Ideally the vet should check your horse's teeth at least once a year.

Newborn foals should have their mouths checked for any abnormalities. Within a few weeks of life foals will develop four incisors: two at the top and two at the bottom. The vet will need to check if they are erupting properly and that all 24 cheek teeth are coming through. Eventually the 12 premolars will be replaced by permanent teeth. The molars (the back 3 cheek teeth) do not have precursors ('milk teeth'), and these will only start to grow into the mouth from 1 year of age onwards. Having your foal's teeth checked at such a young age will ensure he becomes accustomed to having his mouth handled.

2-4 year old horses start to produce their permanent teeth. The vet needs to check that these are erupting and coming through properly at the right time, they will also assess if they are causing irritation to the soft tissues (gums) around them. This is a very important time as between 36 and 44 permanent teeth will be erupting into the mouth. The deciduous teeth can also develop very sharp edges which can damage the cheeks and cause eating difficulty, so it is not unusual for horses in this age group to require rasping. 'Wolf' teeth are vestigial 1st premolar teeth which grow in a small number of horses and will be present by 2 years of age. These should be carefully assessed by a vet and if necessary can be removed during this period.

5 year old horses should have all their permanent teeth. The vet needs to check them to make sure they have all erupted without causing any problems. Canine teeth are often seen in stallions and geldings, these will erupt between the ages of four and five years. Between 25-30% of female horses have rudimentary canine teeth. At this age the vet may rasp the cheek teeth to ensure there are no uncomfortable sharp edges.

Horses over 5 years old will have had their permanent teeth for a while. It is essential that your vet sees your horse regularly to look for any problems, rasp any sharp edges or hooks and check for decay or damage. A horse that receives regular dental care will keep his teeth for up to 5 years longer than a horse who does not and will benefit from better long-term health.

Horses over 15 years old will have a higher incidence of dental problems because of wear and tear and 6-monthly examinations may be necessary to prevent further deterioration.

If you are not sure how old your horse is, your vet will be able to estimate his age by careful examination of the appearance and conformation of the teeth. The teeth can provide information for an informed guess of the age.

What will the vet do when he comes to check my horse's teeth?

The vet will look for a variety of common problems, including:

- Sharp points on the edges of the teeth (molars).
- Overgrown teeth, eg ramps, hooks, spurs.
- Fractured teeth.
- Teeth misalignments, including parrot mouth or sow mouth.
- Abnormal gaps between teeth causing food impaction.
- Mouth ulcers and sore areas of mucosa.
- Gum inflammation.
- Problems with tooth eruption.
- Wolf teeth interference.

Rasping is a very common job for a vet which can be done at home. It involves using various sized rasps to remove sharp enamel points and hooks from cheek teeth, levelling tall or long teeth, rounding and smoothing of teeth to improve the fit of the bit. A dental mouth gag may be used to keep your horse's mouth open throughout the procedure - no pain is involved - preventing your horse from biting the vet by accident. Rasping may sometimes involve sedating your horse if he is particularly lively or if extensive work needs to be done - your horse may have to go to an equine hospital if this is the case.

Modern dentistry however does not just involve rasping the teeth. A good practitioner will examine the mouth thoroughly for any abnormality, rasp the sharp points, balance the heights of overgrown teeth, round the front aspect of the first cheek teeth slightly and advise on any developing dental disease. It may be that some or all of this work is performed with a motorised instrument which is more efficient and often more accurate. Sometimes it is necessary to sedate a horse just to perform a really thorough examination of the mouth. Modern dentistry involves examinations with mirrors, picks and probes and even the best behaved horses can sometimes object to this much as we do!

How can I tell if my horse has a problem with his teeth?

If you have ever had problems with your own teeth, you will know how miserable it can make you feel, well horses can feel just the same with advanced dental problems. Often however, horses are expert at adapting to mild dental pain, and owners may not be aware that anything is wrong at all. Just like with our own teeth, early recognition of problems before they get too serious is the goal, and regular check-ups are essential even if there seems to be nothing wrong.

Keep an eye out for abnormal behaviour:

- Aggressive butting or shaking of hay before eating it - your horse will try to knock off the leaves to make chewing easier.
- Drinking less - cold water may cause discomfort to decaying teeth.
- Dropping half-chewed food (quidding) - related to mouth pain or incorrect alignment of teeth.
- Eating food slowly - reflects painful teeth.
- Head shaking or peculiar head carriage while being ridden - indicating discomfort in the mouth and possible dental problems.
- Head-shaking while eating - caused by a painful mouth.
- Putting hay in his water bucket - horses will soak the hay to make it easier to chew and swallow.
- Reluctance to work in collection, 'on the bit' - when the reins pull on the bit, the horse's lips are pulled towards the first cheek teeth, its essential that this area is kept free from sharp or rough edges.

You will also be able to notice other unusual signs:

- Bad breath (halitosis) - a sign of dental decay or gum disease, just like humans.
- Drooling excessively - may reflect painful teeth.
- Increased incidence of some types of colic.
- Nasal discharges.
- Sores on tongue, lips or gums - a result of sharp points and hooks.
- Swellings on the face or lower jaw.
- Tongue sticking out of mouth - your horse will try and keep his tongue away from sharp teeth edges.
- Weight loss - because your horse is unable to eat properly.

Routine management and regular check-ups will ensure your horses dental health. If you

want your horse to live long, be happy and free from pain, make sure their teeth are checked at least once a year and always keep an eye out for any abnormal signs or behaviour.