

Dental Care

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Proper Routine Dental Care

The majority of horses require routine dental care in order to prevent a variety of problems. Veterinarians may perform a dental prophylaxis which is the examination of a horse's mouth and the use of corrective procedures to stop a disease process. This is an important portion of a horse's health care program. Dental care begins with young foals to determine if they have proper alignment of their incisors and any corrective procedures that may need to be performed. Your veterinarian may recommend yearly dental care after this exam. As the horse enters training he should have a dental prophylaxis to correct any abnormalities, remove any sharp point, and possibly remove wolf teeth that may cause discomfort while wearing a bit. Horses between the ages of 2-5 years can require more frequent dental exams than a middle aged horse due to the shedding of their caps (baby teeth) and the eruption of their permanent teeth. An average mature horse will typically require a yearly dental exam. Horses with oral abnormalities or who are sensitive may need more frequent dental care.

To completely examine the oral cavity a speculum may be used to hold the mouth open to allow the veterinarian visual and/or tactile access to all of the teeth. Sharp points can be reduced or eliminated by rasping with an instrument called a float. There are many sizes, shapes and types of floats including handheld and power floats.

Signs of Dental Disease

There are many signs a horse with dental disease may exhibit some of which are included in the list below. A horse should be seen by a veterinarian if he is exhibiting any signs of dental disease or discomfort.

1. Abnormal biting behavior
2. Bad breath, halitosis
3. Difficulty chewing
4. Discharge from one nostril
5. Dropping excessive amounts of food while eating
6. Headshaking
7. Repeated bouts of colic
8. Tenderness around the face
9. Unable to gain weight

The Anatomy of the Horses' Mouth

The horse is anisognathic, meaning that the distance between the upper, maxillary, teeth and the lower, mandibular, teeth is different. The horse's mandible is narrower than the upper, maxilla. Picture 1 was taken in front of and off to the side of a horse's skull. Picture 2 is of a horse's skull with the mouth open looking straight into the mouth. In the picture you can see that the space between the upper teeth is wider than the space between the lower teeth. This means that the outer portion of the upper teeth and the inside portion of the lower teeth do not come into contact with opposing teeth. As a horse chews and wears down the teeth sharp enamel points can be created. These sharp points tend to occur on the outside of the upper teeth near the cheek and the inside of the lower teeth near the tongue. These sharp points can be uncomfortable and cause trauma, such as ulcers on the cheeks.



Picture 1 Side view of horses skull



Picture 2 Open mouth view of horse skull

Horses' permanent teeth are approximately 4 inches long and erupt approximately 3-4 mm per year. This means that a horse's permanent teeth continue to erupt throughout their lifetime until the entire tooth erupts and is lost.

Eruption Pattern

The first teeth to erupt, the 1st incisors, appear less than one week after birth. During the first two weeks of life the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd cheek teeth erupt. The 2nd incisors erupt between 4-6 weeks of life followed by the 3rd incisors between the ages of 6-9 months. These teeth are deciduous, or baby teeth, and will be replaced by permanent teeth. Below is a chart of the age of eruption for permanent teeth.

1 st incisor	2.5 years
2 nd incisor	3.5 years
3 rd incisor	4.5 years
Canine	4-5 years
Wolf teeth	5-6 months
1 st cheek tooth	2.5 years
2 nd cheek tooth	3.5 years
3 rd cheek tooth	4.0 years
4 th cheek tooth	9-12 months
5 th cheek tooth	2 years
6 th cheek tooth	3.5-4.0 years

Adult horses have 12 incisors in total that have specific wear patterns making age estimation possible.

Canine teeth are more common in geldings and stallions than mares.

Not all horses have wolf teeth and when present they are typically located only in the upper jaw. Your veterinarian may recommend removing wolf teeth as they can cause problems with biting.

Retained caps, or baby teeth that should fall out, may need to be removed by your veterinarian.

References:

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