



American Association  
of Equine Practitioners

Horse Health Education

# DENTAL CARE

The Importance of Maintaining  
the Health of Your Horse's Mouth

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### OVERVIEW

Routine dental care is essential to your horse's health. Periodic exams, corrections and regular maintenance are especially necessary for a number of reasons.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### OVERVIEW

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- We have modified the horse's diet and eating pattern through domestication and confinement.
- We demand more from our performance horses beginning at a younger age.
- We often select breeding animals without regard to dental considerations.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### OVERVIEW

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Proper dental care has its rewards. Your horse will be more comfortable, utilize feed more efficiently and may perform better and even live longer.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE HORSE'S MOUTH



- Horses are grazing animals and their teeth are perfectly adapted for that purpose. The forward teeth (incisors) function to shear off forage.
- The cheek teeth (molars and premolars), with their wide, flat, grveled surfaces, easily grind the feed to a mash before swallowed.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE HORSE'S MOUTH



10-day-old foal

Horses get two sets of teeth in their lifetime. The baby teeth (deciduous teeth) are temporary. The first deciduous incisors may erupt before the foal is born.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE HORSE'S MOUTH



10-month-old foal



2-year-old

The last deciduous teeth come in when the horse is about 8 months of age. Only the incisors and the first three cheek teeth have deciduous precursors to the permanent ones. These teeth begin to be replaced by adult teeth around 2 years of age.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE HORSE'S MOUTH



5-year-old

- By age 5 most horses have their full complement of permanent teeth.
- An adult male (gelding or stallion) has 40 permanent teeth.
- An adult female may have 36 - 40 permanent teeth (mares are less likely to have canine [bridle] teeth)

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE HORSE'S MOUTH



Erupted cap

Keep in mind that there can be significant variations in when teeth erupt in individuals and breeds.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE HORSE'S MOUTH

#### Deciduous (Baby Teeth)

|                                                               |                                                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> incisors (centrals)                           | Birth to first week                                    |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> incisors (intermediates)                      | 4 - 6 weeks                                            |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> incisors (corners)                            | 6 - 9 months                                           |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> & 3 <sup>rd</sup> premolars | Birth or first 2 weeks for all premolars (cheek teeth) |



10-month-old

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE HORSE'S MOUTH

#### Permanent (Adult Teeth)

|                                          |             |
|------------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> incisors (centrals)      | 2 years     |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> incisors (intermediates) | 3 years     |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> incisors (corners)       | 4 years     |
| Canines (bridle)                         | 4 - 5 years |

A numerical system is used when identifying the teeth of a horse.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE HORSE'S MOUTH



#### Permanent (Adult Teeth)

|                                                         |              |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Wolf teeth (1 <sup>st</sup> premolars)                  | 5 - 6 months |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> premolars (1 <sup>st</sup> cheek teeth) | 2 years      |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> premolars (2 <sup>nd</sup> cheek teeth) | 3 years      |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> premolars (3 <sup>rd</sup> cheek teeth) | 4 years      |

A numerical system is used when identifying the teeth of a horse.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE HORSE'S MOUTH

#### Permanent (Adult Teeth)

|                                                      |               |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> molars (4 <sup>th</sup> cheek teeth) | 9 - 12 months |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> molars (5 <sup>th</sup> cheek teeth) | 2 years       |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> molars (6 <sup>th</sup> cheek teeth) | 3 - 4 years   |

A numerical system is used when identifying the teeth of a horse.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### COMMON DENTAL PROBLEMS

The most common dental problems include:



- Sharp enamel points forming on the cheek teeth, causing lacerations of the cheek and tongue
- Retained caps (deciduous teeth that are not shed)
- Discomfort caused by bit contact with the wolf teeth

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### COMMON DENTAL PROBLEMS



- Hooks forming on the upper and lower cheek teeth
- Long and/or sharp canine (bridle) teeth interfering with the insertion or removal of the bit
- Lost and/or broken teeth
- Abnormal or uneven bite planes

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### COMMON DENTAL PROBLEMS

- Excessively worn teeth
- Abnormally long teeth
- Infected teeth and/or gums
- Misaligned/poor apposition (can be due to congenital defects or injury)
- Periodontal (gum) disease

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### RECOGNIZING DENTAL PROBLEMS

Horses with dental problems may show obvious signs such as pain and irritation or may show no noticeable signs at all due to the fact that some horses simply adapt to their discomfort.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### RECOGNIZING DENTAL PROBLEMS

Indications of dental problems may include:



- Loss of feed from the mouth while eating, difficulty with chewing or excessive salivation
- Loss of body condition
- Large or undigested feed particles (long stems or whole grain) in manure

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### RECOGNIZING DENTAL PROBLEMS



- Head tilting or tossing, bit chewing, tongue lolling, fighting the bit or resisting bridling
- Poor performance, such as lugging on the bridle, failing to turn or stop or even bucking
- Foul odor from mouth or nostrils or traces of blood from the mouth
- Nasal discharge or swelling of the face, jaw or mouth tissues

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE

- Oral exams should be an essential part of an annual physical examination. Every dental exam provides the opportunity to perform routine preventative dental maintenance. The end result is a healthier, more comfortable horse.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE



- Floating removes the sharp enamel points and can help create a more even bite plane.
- Routine examination and maintenance should also include identification and correction of any abnormalities.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE

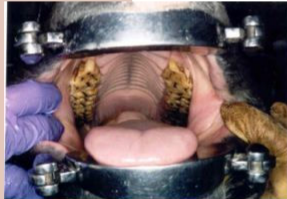
Feeds and feeding management can affect the wear of the horse's teeth. Softer feeds require less chewing and may allow the horse's teeth to become excessively long or wear unevenly.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE



Because the horse's lower jaw is narrower than its upper jaw and the horse grinds its feed with a sideways motion, sharp points tend to form along the edges. Points form on the cheek side of the upper teeth and the tongue side of the lower teeth.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE



When cheek teeth are out of alignment, hooks can form. If left unchecked, these hooks can become long enough to penetrate the hard or soft palate. Small hooks can be removed with rasps. Longer hooks are usually removed with grinders in conjunction with other motorized dental instruments.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE



Uneven or abnormal wear of permanent premolars and molars can result in a "wave mouth". This is commonly seen in middle-age to older horses. Correction of the condition can be achieved with "floating" and/or the use of motorized dental instruments.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### WOLF TEETH

Wolf teeth are very small teeth with short roots that do not set firmly in the jawbone, and are located in front of the second premolar.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### WOLF TEETH

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While not all wolf teeth are troublesome, they are routinely removed to prevent pain or interference with the bit.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE AGE FACTOR

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The age of a horse affects the degree of attention and frequency of dental care required.

- Horses going into training for the first time, especially 2- and 3-year-olds, need a comprehensive dental check-up. Teeth should be floated to remove any sharp points and checked for retained caps. Caps should be removed as is appropriate.
- Floating may improve feed efficiency and make the horse more comfortable.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### THE AGE FACTOR

- Horses 2-5 years old may require more frequent dental exams than older horses. Deciduous teeth tend to be softer than permanent teeth and may develop sharp enamel points more quickly.
- Twenty-four teeth will be shed and replaced during this time, with the potential for 12 to 16 teeth to be erupting simultaneously. Horses in this age group may need to be examined twice yearly, and any necessary procedures should be performed.
- Even the best dental program may not be able to solve or alleviate all of a young horse's teething discomfort.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL



20-year-old

### THE AGE FACTOR

- Mature horses should be examined at least once a year, whether or not there are signs of tooth problems.
- It is important to maintain an even bite plane during a horse's middle teens in order to ensure a level grinding surface into its 20s.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### DEVELOPING GREATER AWARENESS

- If a horse starts behaving abnormally, dental problems should be considered as a potential cause.
- Abnormalities should be corrected with teeth floating and maintained as indicated.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### DEVELOPING GREATER AWARENESS



- Wolf teeth are routinely extracted from performance horses to prevent interference with the bit and its associated pain.
- Sedatives, local anesthetics and analgesics relax the horse and keep it more comfortable during floating and other dental procedures.
- If a loose tooth is found, extraction may be the best alternative. This may reduce the chance of infection or other problems.

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## HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: DENTAL

### DEVELOPING GREATER AWARENESS

- Canine teeth are usually clipped and filed smooth to prevent interference with the bit. This also reduces the possibility of injury to both horse and human.
- Depending on the condition of the horse's teeth, more than one visit may be required to get the mouth in prime working order.
- It is important to catch dental problems early.
- Older horses should have their teeth examined at least once yearly.



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*Photos courtesy of*

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