

Is dentistry essential for horses?



Healthy teeth are essential for a healthy horse; a horse needs good teeth to gather food and to chew their food properly. A vet or qualified equine dentist should be called in regularly to thoroughly examine and carry out any necessary work on your horse's teeth.

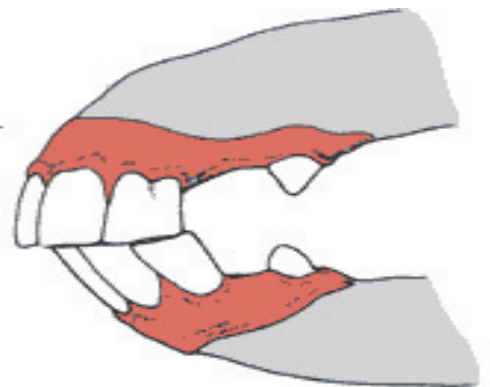
Young horses (between the ages of two and five) require six monthly inspections to remove any caps (milk teeth that have not shed properly) and should always have their teeth checked before being mouthed (a bit placed in the mouth) for the first time. After the age of five years (when the horse has a full set of permanent teeth) all horses should have at least one annual dental check. This is assuming that the horse is mainly grazing. If the horse is being fed significant amounts of concentrates then six monthly check ups are usually necessary. This is because the chew patterns and therefore tooth wear is different when eating concentrates. Remember that horses need a very highly fibrous diet for many reasons; correct tooth wear is only one of them.

Older horses (around 15 years plus) often need more frequent dental care than every 12 months. As the horse ages he or she will lose teeth (actual tooth loss usually starts in the twenties). A vet or qualified equine dentist will be able to make sure that the horse goes through this process as smoothly as possible and will be able to advise you on care options.

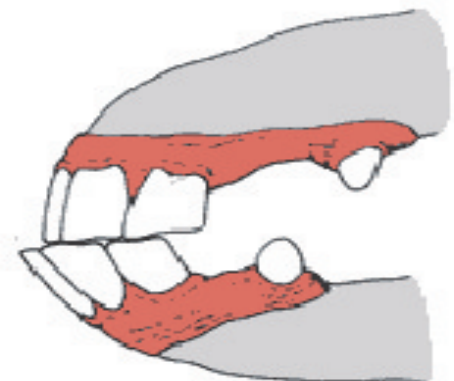
Horses with mouth abnormalities such as parrot mouth (where the top incisors (front teeth) protrude in front of the bottom incisors) and sow mouth (the opposite – bottom incisors in front of top) need extra dental care (see below).

The horse's diet, mainly tough fibrous and often abrasive material, requires a lot of chewing and grinding. In normal situations the teeth of the horse are well equipped to cope with this diet. The top surface area of the molar teeth contains many folds that help the horse to chew the fibrous material.

Horse's teeth continuously erupt throughout their life in order to cope with what they evolved to eat. The horse starts with a set of 'milk teeth' in much the



Parrot mouth



Sow mouth

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same way that we humans do. These are gradually replaced by permanent teeth and by five years old the horse has a full set of very large permanent teeth. The roots of the molars (back) teeth are so long that they are often seen as bumps in the lower jaw line of the horse. In some horses (but much rarer) they are even seen in the upper jaw line (as a row of bumps down the front of the face). These bumps disappear as the teeth begin to wear inside the mouth and the teeth begin erupting on a continual basis.

The permanent teeth do not 'grow' throughout the life of a horse as is commonly thought. Once the permanent teeth (incisors and molars) are fully developed they are very long. They then continuously erupt out of the jaw as they wear at the surface. Eventually they are completely worn out. So a horse's teeth start long and are worn down over time by what they eat.

Well cared for domestic horses generally live for a *lot* longer than free living (wild and feral) horses. A domestic horse can quite easily live to be 25 or 30 years old (and sometimes much more) compared to the average life span of a wild horse which tends to be much less. Often it is poor condition of the teeth that leads to starvation and premature death in free living horses. Therefore the teeth of a domestic horse have to last for much longer than those of a wild horse. In addition domestic horses sometimes eat different feed types to their wild living cousins which causes them wear their teeth differently. Good dental care is an essential part of domestic horse care.

The teeth can develop sharp edges and uneven wear. If the horse's ability to grind down food sufficiently is compromised for any reason, the enzymes and microbes of the gastrointestinal tract have a hard time continuing the digestive process and one of the results is a drop in condition. Horses do not ruminate – re-chew their food – like cows and sheep so they only get the one chance to process their food with their teeth and make it ready for the gut to digest.

Teeth problems can also cause behavioural problems as the horse attempts to alleviate any pain. These behavioural problems can include being unwilling to accept the bit however horses will 'put up with' discomfort and pain to a large extent (see below).

Some of the problems that can occur include:

- Sharp cheek teeth (molars). This occurs to some extent in all horses but its occurrence is accelerated when horses have a high grain diet because the horse chews grain



This five year old horse has 'tooth bumps' in the lower jaw line which will disappear as the teeth begin to wear inside the mouth.

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differently to grasses and hay. This causes the teeth to wear shaper edges. These sharp edges lacerate the side of the mouth (the insides of the cheeks). When a horse has pressure added to this area (for example by a noseband) they can be in pain.

- Imperfect meeting of the teeth (parrot mouth) and sow mouth causes problems with grazing (as the horse cannot 'clip' the grass properly) and the horse usually develops sharp 'hooks' on the last molars at the back of the mouth due to them also being out of alignment. Regular dental attention is needed to deal with this hook.
- Wolf teeth which are a much-reduced vestige of a tooth that was well developed in the ancestor of the horse. They sit in front of the first molar and because they usually have shallow roots they can be loose and sometimes interfere with the bit action. A loose wolf tooth may cause a horse to head toss or be reluctant to respond to the bit. They are easily removed by a vet or qualified equine dentist.
- Teething problems, as with human babies, the eruption of teeth in young horses may cause transitory trouble. Also the horse may have 'caps' which are temporary (milk) teeth that have not fallen out properly but form a cap on top of a newer permanent tooth. These caps can create decay in the newly erupted permanent tooth as food gets trapped under them. They are easily removed by a vet or qualified equine dentist.
- Decayed teeth, this can lead to the destruction of the tooth, which may lead to infection of the surrounding bone.



The food of domestic horses causes different wear patterns of the teeth to that of wild horses.

Some of the signs of dental problems include:-

- Behavioural problems.
- Unresponsiveness to the bit or head tossing.
- Weight loss.
- Loss of coat shine.
- Irregular chewing patterns.

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- Quidding (dropping partially chewed food out of the mouth).
- Excessive salivation/sticky saliva.
- Bad breath.
- Swelling of the face or jaw.
- Lack of desire to eat hard food.
- Reluctance to drink cold water.

However horses often show hardly any if no outward signs even when they are experiencing extreme discomfort or pain so don't wait for behavioural signs before doing anything. Horses are naturally a stoic animal that 'put up' with pain. This is because they are an animal that is predated on (in the wild) and showing pain is not a good strategy for survival. Showing pain can mean that they will be picked out by a predator as a likely and easier catch. Therefore horses do not whimper or make any other sound when in pain. As a contrast think about a typical predator - a dog - for example, who lets it be known when they are in pain by yelping or whining.

See our publication [A horses is a horse of course \(2011\)](#) for more information about horse behaviour and why it is so important to understand why horses do the things they do and how this relates to their management and training.

Horses need frequent dental care, so make sure you schedule regular visits from your vet or qualified equine dentist.



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