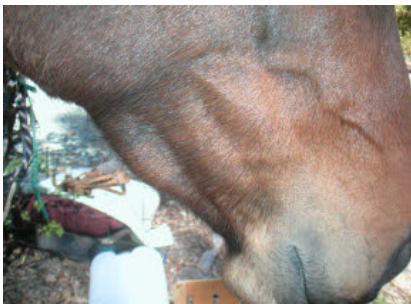


Taking care of your horse's teeth



The horse's diet, mainly tough fibrous material, requires a lot of chewing and grinding. The natural diet of the horse is very tough, fibrous and abrasive. In normal situations the teeth of the horse are well equipped to cope with this diet. The top surface area of the teeth contain folds that help the horse to chew fibrous material. The teeth continuously erupt throughout the life of the horse in order to cope with what they evolved to eat. By five years old the horse has a full set of very large teeth. The roots of the molars (back) teeth are so large that they are often seen as bumps in the jaw line of the horse (usually the bottom jaw line and sometimes the upper jaw line in certain breeds). These bumps disappear as the teeth begin to wear inside the mouth and the teeth begin erupting on a continual basis.



Well cared for domestic horses generally live for a lot longer than free living horses and other equines. This means that there teeth have to last them for a lot longer too.

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.

Teeth problems can also cause behavioural problems as the horse attempts to alleviate any pain. Horses need regular dental care if they are to get the maximum benefit from their feed and perform well.

Potential problems 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 differently to grasses and hay. This causes the teeth to wear shaper edges.
- Imperfect meeting of the teeth (parrot mouth) is where the front teeth (incisors) do not meet. This causes a problem with grazing (as the horse cannot 'clip' the grass properly) and the horse often develops sharp 'hooks' on the last molars at the back of the mouth due to them also being out of alignment.
- 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. A loose wolf tooth may cause a horse to head toss or be reluctant to respond to the bit.
- 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 but form a cap on top of a newer permanent tooth. These caps can create decay as food gets trapped under them.

Please remember

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- Decayed teeth, this can lead to the destruction of the tooth, which may lead to infection of the surrounding bone.

Some of the signs of dental problems include:

- behavioural problems
- weight loss
- loss of coat shine
- irregular chewing patterns
- quidding (dropping partially chewed food out of the mouth)
- unresponsiveness to the bit or head tossing
- excessive salivation
- bad breath,
- swelling of the face or jaw
- lack of desire to eat hard food
- reluctance to drink cold water

However some horses show hardly any if no outward signs even though they are experiencing extreme discomfort so don't wait for signs before doing anything.



A vet or qualified horse dentist should be called in regularly to thoroughly examine and carry out any necessary work on the teeth. Horses aged 2–5 years should have their teeth checked prior to commencing work or at 6- monthly intervals. After the age of 5 years (when the horse has a full set of permanent teeth) all horses should have at least one annual dental check, more often if the horse is being fed significant amounts of concentrates as chew patterns and therefore tooth wear is different when eating concentrates. Remember that horses need a very high fibre diet for many reasons, correct teeth wear is only one of them.

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