

Got horse teeth?

Here's how to care for them properly

Just as people visit the dentist on a regular basis to maintain proper dental health, horses also require regular dental care. Unlike people, horses have what we refer to as hypsodont teeth. Their teeth extend into their jaw with a root about 3 to 4 inches long, which continues to erupt as the grinding surface is worn away.

To grind feed properly, horses move their jaws up and down, side to side, and forward to back, tearing and grinding forages for better digestion. If their teeth are not wearing evenly or points have not been removed, the side-to-side and forward-to-back movements can be inhibited, leaving the horse to chew only in the up-and-down movement. This movement alone does not allow for proper mastication of forages; consequently, nutritional benefits from feed are lost.

Wear and tear

All animals with hypsodont teeth develop points, hooks, and irregular wear problems. To see what these look like and more, visit <https://bit.ly/bb-equine-health>.

Feed types and feeding styles can affect wear patterns in a horse's teeth. For example, head

height while chewing affects the alignment of a horse's teeth.

In pasture grazing environments, horses chew with their heads below shoulder level. When horses chew with their heads low, their incisors and molars line up correctly. In stables, horses are often fed above shoulder level. When horses chew in an elevated position, their teeth do not line up correctly, causing uneven wear patterns that can lead to hooks and ramps.

Normal molar position also leads to point formation. The maxilla (upper jaw) is wider than the mandible (lower jaw), so the upper molars extend out over the lower molars. This natural offset of the molars leads to sharp points forming on the outside of the upper molars (against the cheek) and the inside of the bottom molars (against the tongue). These sharp points can cause sores to form on the soft tissue. Points can also cause problems when halters and bridles push sensitive tissues against them.

A horse's teeth need an opposing surface for continued normal wear. Without an opposing surface, teeth will continue to erupt, creating excessively long



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teeth that inhibit normal chewing motions. If not filed down or removed, long teeth can continue to lengthen until they cut into the opposing gum tissue. Teeth can also fracture and fall out.

Signs of dental issues

All horse owners should be aware of the signs horses may exhibit when they are experiencing dental problems. Signs of problems include:

- Weight loss or poor body condition score
- Eating more slowly due to mouth pain
- Tipping the head to one side to allow chewing food on only one side of the mouth
- Dropping food from the mouth while eating
- Rolling feed into little balls and dropping it
- Resisting the bridle and bit

- Tossing the head while bridled
- Mouthing the bit

If any of these signs are observed, owners should contact a veterinarian.

Routine check-ups

Horses should be evaluated on an annual basis to ensure proper dental wear. This evaluation must be performed under the direction of a licensed veterinarian. The veterinarian may employ an equine dental technician to perform altering of the teeth but will maintain responsibility for sedation and diagnosis of abnormal problems.

Regular dental care should begin during the yearling year. Until age five, horses undergo tremendous dental changes with loss of baby teeth and eruption of permanent teeth. During this time, it is important to address dental problems when detected. Some severe misalignment problems need to be corrected surgically in young foals. During this period, the horse may need dental attention more than once a year.

From five years of age through the early teens, an annual dental care program is usually sufficient. High performance horses sometimes receive dental care several times a year to prevent behavioral issues and ensure optimal performance. As a horse moves into old age, it may require more frequent care.

Common procedures

Most often, dental examinations and procedures require sedating the horse for safety. A mouth speculum is often used to keep a horse's mouth open for safety and to facilitate examination of the incisors and molars for proper alignment. The speculum also allows a veterinarian to check for points and hooks.

Routine dental care includes filing or grinding points (also known as "floating") and creating balanced molar surfaces with hand or electric tools. Misalignment of the jaw requires more extensive attention to realign the jaw and teeth.

Other dental problems to address include uneven wear patterns and tooth abscesses. Each of these dental issues can lead to more serious problems in the way the horse carries a bit

and will affect the horse's natural chewing process.

When pressure is applied to a bit, it can cause the cheek or other soft tissue to come into contact with the front part of the cheek teeth and, if they are sharp, cause pain. Often in horses that are being ridden with a bridle, an equine dentist will perform a procedure called a "bit seat." This modification involves removing all sharp edges on the front surface of the first molars, also known as cheek teeth.

As a horse owner, it is your responsibility to ensure your horse receives proper dental care. If dental issues are properly addressed, your horse will likely lead a longer, more productive life.

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