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Basic Dental Care and How to Detect Trouble

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FACT SHEET

Department of Animal Science, University of Connecticut

Effective Horse Management - Third in the Horse Health Series

Basic Dental Care and How to Detect Trouble

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When was the last time you had your horse's teeth checked? If you're like most horse owners, you may not be aware that all horses should receive a complete dental exam at least yearly starting from their first year of life. By the time most horse owners recognize that a horse is having trouble eating or is losing weight, that horse's teeth may be severely abnormal.

Equine dentists or equine veterinarians that perform dentistry (we will use equine dentists for the rest of the article) have to look for different situations in the horse's mouth at different stages of the horse's life. The following table lists situations that are most common at these stages.

Age of horse	Will be evaluated for
Birth – 18 months (should be examined at least once a year)	Defects that the horse may have been born with related to head symmetry or chewing function
	Proper eruption of teeth
	Incisor (front teeth) alignment
	Sharp enamel points on teeth
	Improper position and number of teeth
	Abnormal wear
18-52 months	Eruption cysts in the gums over permanent

(should be examined twice a year)	teeth
	Gingivitis (inflammation of gums)
	Periodontal disease
	Loose or infected caps or cap slivers (cap=remnant of crown of deciduous tooth after roots has been resorbed)
	Sharp enamel points on the premolar, molar, and wolf teeth (these are the first upper premolars that are vestigial (not fully functional or formed)
	Unequal eruption of permanent incisors
	Wolf teeth interference with bit
	Rounding of edges of front cheek teeth (first premolar) to keep biting comfortable
4-10 years (should be examined once a year)	Contact and balance of bite surface
	Sharp enamel points on cheek teeth
	Sharp edges of cheek teeth which interfere with the bit
	Jaw balance
	Symmetry, contact, length and balance of incisors
10-18 years (should be examined once a year)	Abnormalities of wear that can lead to abnormal crown wear, crown fracture and periodontal disease
	“Wave” mouth due to abnormalities of wear on central molars making teeth look wave-like
	Sharp enamel points on teeth that may require extensive correction (hooks,* ramps**, or beaks***)
	Balance of tooth alignment
	Length of canine teeth if needed
18 and older (may need frequent oral exams and dental maintenance to keep mouths healthy)	Periodontal disease (60-80% incidence)
	Tartar accumulation
	Gingivitis
	Tooth loosening
	Loss of grinding surface of teeth
	Abnormalities of wear
	Need for geriatric diet
	Sharp enamel points on teeth (hooks, ramps or beaks)
	Balance between upper and lower jaws

* Hooks = abrupt elevation at rostral or back edge of tooth, involves entire tooth surface

** Ramps = area where dental arcade slopes and exposed crown is taller at one end of tooth than other

*** Beaks = enamel point on back or rostral edge of arcade

These are signs that a horse is having problems with his teeth:

- long, unchewed particles of hay in manure
- changes in eating or drinking habits
- irregular movement of lower jaw
- bumps or enlargement on jaw/side of face
- abnormal tongue carriage
- sharp points on front of first lower or upper molars
- oral pain
- head shy
- quidding – dropping partially chewed food from mouth
- weight loss
- halitosis (bad breath)
- abnormal slurping sound during chewing
- food pocketing between teeth
- loosening and loss of teeth
- lacerations of cheek and tongue
- “hamster-like” cheek swelling
- very slow chewing
- inappetence
- holding head in abnormal position during eating
- using one side of the mouth for chewing
- reluctant to eat hay
- spending more time eating
- abnormal head carriage
- resistant to bit
- headshaking during work
- foul smelling chronic nasal discharge from one nostril
- excess salivation (drooling or foaming)
- bleeding from mouth
- swelling or distortion of lips
- tooth displacement

Next you might be wondering how to go about selecting an equine dentist or equine veterinarian that specializes in dentistry. An equine dentist does not have to be certified; therefore, there is no universal standard of quality. You might consider checking to see if the equine dentist is a member of the International Association of Equine Dentistry, an organization of non-veterinary equine dental practitioners that has set certain standards. You may want to check to see if a veterinarian is a member of the American Veterinary Dental Society or has a fellowship in the Academy of Veterinary Dentistry. Additionally, the veterinarian could have taken continuing education classes in dentistry offered by the American Association of Equine Practitioners. Word of mouth or referral is another good way to find an equine dentist or veterinarian.

Hopefully this has enhanced your knowledge of equine dentistry and its importance. Please do not attempt to perform dental procedures on your horse, seek an experienced equine dentist or equine veterinarian to undertake this necessary care for your horse. Proper dental care from the beginning of your horse's life can help eliminate problems before they start.

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