

# Equine Dentistry - Routine Care



Dentistry is an essential and important part of the health care of your horse. Your horse's teeth should be examined at least once a year. In some individuals, particularly for those with dental abnormalities, dental work may be required more frequently.

As qualified veterinary surgeons we are able to provide sedation, pain relief and local anaesthesia as required during dental work, allowing a more thorough examination and treatment and less pain and stress to your horse. This can also be safer for the horse, veterinary surgeon and the handler.

## DENTAL EQUIPMENT



The following equipment may be used by your veterinary surgeon for oral examination and routine equine dentistry:

- full mouth speculum (gag)
- dental head torch or light
- dental mirror
- dental picks and probes
- full set of rasps (floats)
- power instruments
- headstand
- a variety of sedatives and local anaesthetics.

## Why is Routine Dental Care essential?

During the course of evolution, horses' teeth have adapted to chew grass and fibre, but in doing so the teeth wear down at a rate of 2 to 3mm per year. This wear is balanced by eruption at an equal rate, until the horse reaches its mid to late twenties, when all of the reserve crown will have erupted and the teeth begin to fall out.

**Recent studies have shown that up to 80% of all domestic horses have significant dental abnormalities.**

The lower jaw of a horse is narrower than the upper jaw. When a horse grazes at pasture, the natural circular action required to eat grass brings the chewing surface of the opposing teeth into contact and the teeth wear down evenly. When a horse eats hay or hard feed, the horse does not need the same circular action to chew these 'softer' feeds and the result is that the outer edges of the top molars and the inner edges of the lower molars do not come into contact and don't wear down. The end result is sharp enamel edges that cause ulceration and pain.

Centuries of cross breeding horses with differing head sizes has made dental abnormalities, such as hooks, overcrowding and abnormally positioned teeth very common. If a tooth is even partially unopposed then large overgrowths will quickly form, causing pain and impeding chewing.

Compounding these problems, we then put our horses in a bit and bridle which can press against sharp teeth and can cause cheek and tongue lacerations and ulceration. To work on the bit in an outline, the horse must drop the lower jaw forward. Overgrown teeth will restrict this movement of the lower jaw, causing pain and resentment.

## Routine Dental Rasing (Floating)

- A thorough oral examination will be carried out by your vet. This will involve the use of a gag (or speculum) and light. Some sedation may be given to allow a more thorough assessment and more effective rasping.
- Once dental overgrowths and sharp edges have been identified on your horse's teeth, these will be rasped (floated). This will leave these edges smooth and prevent further pain or trauma. This process may be carried out using hand tools (rasps), power tools or a combination of both.



**CHEEK TEETH OF 3 YEAR OLD HORSE**  
Note sharp enamel point causing ulcer



**SAME HORSE AFTER RASPING**

### HOW CAN YOU RECOGNISE DENTAL PROBLEMS?

Even in horses with moderately severe mouth lacerations and dental disease, the desire to eat will be maintained and the problems may not be obvious without a full dental examination. Signs of dental problems include:

- dropping food (quidding)
- weight loss
- bad odour
- biting problems or evasion
- head tilt or shaking
- facial swelling/nasal discharge
- colic or choke.

### How often should your horse's teeth be checked?

<b>Birth - 18 months</b>	Check for alignment. Deciduous (baby) teeth can get sharp enamel points too.
<b>18 months - 4 years</b>	During this time all deciduous teeth (caps) are lost and 36 - 44 permanent teeth erupt. Routine dental care is essential during this time. Before putting a bit in the horse the teeth must be examined and any wolf teeth assessed for potential interference.
<b>4 - 18 years</b>	Regular checks every 6 -12 months.
<b>&gt;18 years</b>	Regular checks as teeth wear down. Dental disease is common in the older horse.

We recommend your horse's mouth is examined at least once a year. The interval for inspection and treatment will vary between individuals and the problem presented. Please ask your vet to check your horse's teeth as part of its annual vaccination and check up.



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