

Equine Dentistry



EQUINE GUELPH
helping horses for life

The average horse chews about 60,000 bites per day! Not surprisingly, the mouth plays a very important role in a horse's overall health. Lack of dental care can lead to number of problems, including colic, weight loss and issues under saddle. While horses don't need to brush their teeth daily, your veterinarian should examine your horse's teeth every six months to a year. Horses that are young, elderly or have a history of dental problems may need their teeth checked more frequently.

If you have ever had a tooth ache, you know the excruciating pain that comes along with dental problems! However, unlike humans, horses can't tell us it hurts. Some common signs of dental problems are: decreased appetite, becoming head shy, undigested feed in the feces, foul breath, reddened or inflamed gums and reacting negatively to a bit. If you suspect your horse is having a problem, contact your veterinarian for help.

The horse has both temporary and permanent teeth. Like humans, horses lose their "baby teeth" when their permanent teeth develop. The permanent teeth continue to grow throughout the life of the horse. However, horses grind down their teeth by chewing. A horse that cribs can show accelerated uneven wear. Horses can develop a number of dental ailments, including the following:



A horse's teeth can help determine its age. The skull above is from an older horse — the teeth are worn down from many years of chewing.

Sharp Enamel Points

Horses will develop sharp points as a result of chewing and can cause lacerations in the mouth. Quidding (balling up grass in the cheek to create a barrier from the sharp edges) can be an indicator sharp points have developed. You may also notice clumps of wadded up hay dropping from the horse's mouth. Your veterinarian should perform a yearly dental float.

Wolf Teeth

Some horses also develop one to four wolf teeth (more common in the upper jaw) which erupt just in front of the premolars and can present problems interfering with the bit. They are frequently removed especially if they are too large, impacted or infected.

Retention of Temporary Teeth

Horses commonly retain their temporary teeth after their permanent teeth have erupted. This can cause the horse pain during chewing. Young horses should be checked for retained caps prior to the start of training. A veterinarian should remove the retained teeth.

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Tooth-Root Abscess

Tooth-root abscesses can occur in the horse's molars and usually cause substantial pain. The horse will often stop eating and become depressed. Symptoms include swelling of the jaw, foul breath, and nasal discharge.

Smooth Mouth

In elderly horses the teeth may lose their rough edges and become entirely smooth, which results in an inability to grind food. In some horses, the teeth may be lost entirely. There is no treatment, and horses with smooth mouth should be fed highly digestible feeds that are easy to eat, such as soaked hay cubes or beet pulp – your veterinarian will be able to recommend the best course of management.

Broken or Missing Teeth:

A horse with broken or missing teeth may have difficulty chewing properly, which can result in weight loss. If you suspect or notice a broken or missing tooth, discuss management strategies with your veterinarian.

Veterinarian versus Equine Dentist

Dental care is not limited to the horse's teeth. During a dental check, the veterinarian will also check the horse's head, oral cavity, sinuses, general health and nutrition. Dental care of the horse includes special tools, equipment and sedation, to make the experience less stressful on the horse. Veterinarians who practice horse care are also trained in equine dentistry. If you employ a specialist in equine dentistry, it is highly recommended to choose a professional that has also graduated as a veterinarian. In certain provinces it is illegal to perform dentistry without the supervision of a veterinarian.

Equine Guelph would like to extend thanks to the Ontario Veterinary College veterinarians for input and content review of this fact sheet. One resource used to compile this info sheet is the Book of Horses by UCDAVIS School of Veterinary Medicine which is also used as a reference text book in Equine Guelph's Health and Disease Prevention Online Course.

If you are interested in learning more about equine teeth, please view Equine Guelph's YouTube video looking at horse's teeth as they age.

Sink your teeth into more health care knowledge — Enroll in Equine Guelph's next offering of their online 12-week course: [Equine Health & Disease Prevention](#).