

# EQUINE DENTAL

Routine dental care is essential to your horse's health. Periodic examination, corrections and regular maintenance are recommended for all equine. Proper dental care has its rewards. Your horse will be more comfortable, will utilize feed more efficiently, may perform better and may even live longer.

The following chart shows the approximate ages at which different teeth erupt. During the period of tooth eruption and shedding, some problems may occur. Your veterinarian should be consulted routinely during this time or if you suspect your horse is having difficulty with this process. It should be noted that there can be significant variation in eruption times between individuals and breeds.



## Deciduous (Baby Teeth)

- 1st incisors (centrals) Birth to 1st week
- 2nd incisors (intermediates) 4 to 6 wks
- 3rd incisors (corners) 6 to 9 months
- 1st, 2nd & 3rd premolars Birth to first 2 weeks (cheek teeth) for all premolars



## Permanent (Adult Teeth)

- 1st incisors (centrals) 2½ years
- 2nd incisors (intermediates) 3½ years
- 3rd incisors (corners) 4½ years
- Canines (bridle) 4 to 5 years
- Wolf teeth (1st premolars) 5 to 6 months
- 2nd premolars (1st cheek teeth) 2½ years
- 3rd premolars (2nd cheek teeth) 3 years
- 4th premolars (3rd cheek teeth) 4 years
- 1st molars (4th cheek teeth) 9 to 12 months
- 2nd molars (5th cheek teeth) 2 years
- 3rd molars (6th cheek teeth) 3½ to 4 years

## COMMON DENTAL PROBLEMS

Horses may suffer from any of several dental problems. The most common include:

- Sharp enamel points forming on cheek teeth, causing lacerations of cheeks and tongue
- Retained caps (deciduous teeth that are not shed)
- Discomfort caused by bit contact with the wolf teeth
- Hooks forming on the upper and lower cheek teeth
- Long and/or sharp canine (bridle) teeth interfering with the insertion or removal of the bit
- Lost and/or broken teeth
- Abnormal or uneven bite planes
- Excessively worn teeth
- Abnormally long teeth
- Infected teeth and/or gums
- Misalignment/poor apposition (bite)
- Periodontal (gum) disease

## RECOGNIZING DENTAL PROBLEMS

Horses with dental problems may show obvious signs such as pain or irritation, or they may show no noticeable signs at all. This is due to the fact that some horses simply adapt to their discomfort. For this reason, periodic dental examinations are essential.

Indicators of dental problems include:

- Loss of feed from the mouth while eating, difficulty with chewing or excessive salivation
- Loss of body condition
- Large or undigested feed particles (long stems or whole grain) in manure
- Head-tilting or head-tossing, bit-chewing, tongue-lolling, fighting the bit or resisting bridling
- Poor performance, such as lugging on the bridle, failing to turn or stop, even bucking
- Foul odor from mouth or nostrils, or traces of blood from the mouth
- Nasal discharge or swelling of the face, jaw or mouth tissues

## PREVENTIVE MAINTANCE

An oral examination should be an essential part of an annual physical examination by a veterinarian. Every dental exam provides the opportunity to perform routine preventative dental maintenance. The end result is a healthier, more comfortable horse.

Routine maintenance of a horse's teeth has been historically referred to as "floating." Floating removes the sharp enamel points. Occlusal equilibration is the term now used to describe smoothing enamel points, correcting malocclusion, balancing the dental arcades and correcting other dental problems listed under "Common Dental Problems." A complete oral examination should precede any dental procedures.

When turned out on pasture, horses graze almost continuously, picking up dirt and grit in the process. This, along with silicate in grass, wears down the teeth. Stabled horses, however, may not give their teeth the same workout. Feedings are more apt to be scheduled, not continuous, and include processed grains and hays. Softer feeds require less chewing. This may allow the horse's teeth to become excessively long or to wear unevenly. Adult teeth erupt throughout life and are worn down by chewing. Because the horse's lower rows of cheek teeth are closer together than the upper rows of cheek teeth and the horse chews with a sideways motion, sharp points form along the edges of the cheek teeth. Points form on the outside (cheek side) of the upper teeth and the tongue side of the lower teeth. These points should be smoothed to prevent damage and ulceration of the cheeks and tongue.

Routine examination and correction is especially important in horses that are missing teeth or whose teeth are not wearing properly because of misalignment. For example, if the front or last cheek teeth are out of alignment, hooks can form. Untreated, these hooks can become long or sharp enough to damage soft tissue. Short hooks or other malocclusions may be corrected with hand instruments. Tall malocclusions may be corrected with motorized instrumentation. Motorized instruments have replaced molar cutters and chisels because there is less chance of tooth damage. Tall malocclusions may require several treatments spread over 12 to 18 months.

## **WOLF TEETH**

Wolf teeth are very small teeth located in front of the second premolar. They rarely appear in the lower jaw. A horse may have one to four, or no wolf teeth. While not all wolf teeth are troublesome, veterinarians routinely remove them to prevent pain or interference with a bit. For young stallions, wolf teeth extraction is typically performed at the same time as the castration.

## **THE AGE FACTOR**

The age of a horse affects the degree of attention and frequency of dental care required. Consider these points:

- Foals should be examined after birth and periodically during the first year to diagnose and correct congenital dental normalities.
- Yearlings can have enamel points sharp enough to damage cheek and tongue tissue. Floating will make them more comfortable.
- Horses going into training for the first time, especially 2- and 3-year-olds, need a comprehensive dental check-up. Teeth should be floated to remove any sharp points and checked for retained caps. Caps should be removed if they have not shed.
- Horses aged 2 to 5 years may require more frequent dental exams than older horses. Deciduous teeth tend to be softer than permanent teeth and may develop sharp enamel points more quickly.
- Mature horses should get a dental examination at least annually to maintain correct alignment and to diagnose any problems.
- Senior horses (17 years old or older) are at increased risk for developing periodontal disease. This painful disease must be diagnosed early for successful treatment. Beyond the age of 20, the tooth surfaces may be worn excessively and/or unevenly, and dental alignment correction may be impossible.
- Horses over 20 years of age should receive a dental evaluation and nutritional counseling at least annually to maintain their conditioning and quality of life. With routine dental care, many horses will maintain functional dentition into their third and fourth decades of life.

## **DEVELOPING GREATER AWARENESS**

- If a horse starts behaving abnormally, dental problems should be considered as a potential cause.
- Abnormalities should be corrected and teeth should be floated and maintained as indicated.
- Wolf teeth are routinely extracted from performance horses to prevent interference with the bit and prevent associated pain.
- Sedatives, local anesthetics and analgesics relax the horse and keep it more comfortable during floating and other dental procedures.
- Most equine dental procedures, including basic floating, irreversibly change the horse's teeth and therefore are most appropriately performed by a veterinarian.
- If your equine practitioner finds a loose tooth, he or she may choose to extract it to help reduce the chance of infection or other problems.
- Canine teeth, usually present in mature geldings and stallions, may be gently rounded and smoothed. This procedure is performed to prevent interference with the bit and to reduce the possibility of injury to the horse, the handler, and other horses pastured or stabled with the gelding.
- Depending upon the condition of your horse's teeth, more than one visit from your equine practitioner may be required to get the horse's mouth in prime working order.
- It is important to catch dental problems early. Waiting too long may increase the difficulty of correcting certain conditions or may even make correction impossible.

