



Equine Dentistry

Equine Dentistry is an integral part of the overall well being of every horse. Dental care needs to be considered as part of the complete health picture of your horse and contributes to healthy digestion, body condition and performance. It is very important to have a thorough oral exam on your horse yearly because horses have hypsodont teeth. Hypsodont teeth continue to erupt (or grow) throughout a horse's life. Because the top arcade is wider than their lower arcade, horses can develop very sharp points that can cause cheek abrasions or tongue ulcers which can be prevented with routine dental care. The oral exam is done with a full mouth dental speculum to ensure that the entire dental arcade can be visualized and palpated. Once the veterinarian has a good look at the horse's dental situation, she or he can recommend the proper care and maintenance schedule for your horse's teeth.

Generally, oral exams should be started at birth to help recognize dental problems. Between the ages two and five, horses are erupting new teeth and losing deciduous teeth (baby teeth). The permanent teeth push the deciduous teeth out, also called caps. When the shedding process of these caps is not complete they become retained and can cause discomfort and malocclusions. This is also the age when wolf teeth, the first premolar, should be extracted if present to prevent biting problems. Training is commonly started at this time, and it is recommended to have your young horse's teeth floated twice a year during this critical age. Once horses are nearing 15 years of age it is recommended to go back to a twice-yearly exam. More conservative care should be taken with an older horse, as it is crucial to check for loose or fractured teeth.

It is a common misconception that your horse only needs his or her teeth floated if underweight. However, the following clinical signs, complaints and findings warrant an evaluation: weight loss or failure to gain weight, difficulty eating, slow or reluctant to eat, quidding or dropping feed, abnormal head movement or carriage, halitosis (bad breath), facial swelling, colic, esophageal choke, nasal discharge, drooling or salivation, poor performance, difficulty with the bit, or behavior changes.

There are many common findings that can be handled at a routine appointment. Sharp enamel points of the cheek teeth can cause ulcers on the cheek or tongue. Hooks are commonly found on the upper premolars and lower molars and can cause an abnormal rotation and grinding of the jaw. Wave mouths can occur due to malocclusions or uneven wearing of the teeth. A step mouth can develop when there is a missing or broken tooth. Severe congenital defects such as parrot mouth (overbite) or sow mouth (underbite) require more frequent management and may require more advanced modalities. Abnormal wear can be seen from trauma, malocclusions or vices such as cribbing.

Equine dental care has been established since the late 18th century but has come a long way in technology and skill. Equine dental equipment now has cutting edge technology with power tools available. The development of more advanced dental floats, the speculum, light systems, head restraints and sedatives have dramatically improved the quality and efficiency of dental examinations and treatments. There is considerable controversy amongst horse owners on the safety of such new procedures when compared to the hand files. The power tools have a higher risk of creating thermal injury to the pulp tissues whenever crowns are reduced and can occur with improper technique and training. It is critical that you use a veterinarian that has competence in their existing technique. Power floats, when used with proper technique, will get the job done in a shorter time frame. Correcting large hooks, steps, and creating bit seats can generate too much heat and should be done in stages or with frequent rinsing.

Preventing these problems from occurring or catching them at an early stage is yet another reason why your horse should have routine dental exams and treatments. An oral exam is also recommended as part of a thorough yearly physical exam and during a pre-purchase exam. Teeth are a non-renewable resource and should be handled with care. Overall, horses' teeth are a vital part to having a happy and healthy horse.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.

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This article originally appeared in Horse & Pony magazine in June 2011 and is reprinted with their permission.