

Having performance problems with your horse this year?

Does your trail horse fuss and resist bridling? Is your dressage horse less obedient, forward and willing? Has your barrel horse lost his edge? All of these problems may indicate your horse's teeth need attention.

Horses are hypsodonts, meaning that their teeth continue to erupt throughout most of their lives. This is what allows them to eat tough, fibrous grasses, hay and whole grains that would wear our teeth away to nothing very quickly. A horse's lower jaw is also narrower than its upper jaw. As he grinds his feed with a sideways motion sharp points tend to form on the edges of the teeth. Points form on the cheek side of the upper teeth and the tongue side of the lower teeth and can be sharp enough to cause cuts or ulcers in the soft tissues of the mouth. If this uneven wear is allowed to continue, horses can develop waves, ramps, hooks and other serious malocclusions of the cheek teeth that can lead to severe pain, infection or tooth loss. Additionally, horses may have upper and/or lower wolf teeth in front of the first cheek teeth. Wolf teeth in horses are similar to wisdom teeth in people. Since they have no known function and can cause discomfort or pinching when the horse wears a bit, they are generally removed.

A common question posed by horse owners is how come my horse's teeth need to be floated and the wild horse's do not? One reason is that wild horses forage for very tough, mature prairie grasses constantly, wearing their teeth quickly and more evenly. Domesticated horses are often kept in stalls and fed diets high in sweet feeds or concentrate pellets that require little chewing. Even horses kept at pasture are grazing soft, higher quality pasture grasses, clover and alfalfa that do not wear the teeth like prairie grass. The second reason is that wild horses do not wear bits, bridles or halters that can pinch or put pressure on the sharp edges of their teeth. Lastly, wild horses do not live as long as our domesticated horses. Long before dental problems sicken a wild horse, injury, disease or predators have done them in. We, on the other hand, expect our horses to live to 30 or 40 years of age and their athletic careers often continue well into their 20's.

Not just older horses need dental care. Young and middle-aged horses can also benefit from routine dental care. Before wearing a bit for the first time, young horses should have wolf teeth, if present, extracted and the teeth should be floated. The softer teeth of young horses are likely to develop sharp points by the time the animal begins training. If sources of discomfort are addressed prior to beginning training, horses are less likely to resist the bit, the bridle or the trainer! As horses advance in age, they may start to show signs of malocclusions. Broken and missing teeth, slight over- or under-bites, or arthritis of the temporomandibular (jaw) joint can lead to razor sharp hooks, ramps or waves.

Horses with dental pathology may show signs such as poor performance, behavioral problems, weight loss, head tilting or dribbling feed while eating, facial swellings or discharge from the mouth or nostrils. However, some horses simply adapt to the discomfort and may not show outward signs until problems become very severe. This is why an annual dental examination is necessary. Routine corrective procedures (floating) can be performed if necessary and abnormalities can be identified and addressed appropriately, preventing permanent damage or the need for costly treatments. The result is a healthier, happier horse.

Currently, non-veterinarian "lay-dentists" can legally provide basic dental services to horses in most states. However, only veterinarians are trained in equine anatomy, physiology and pathology, enabling them to take the best and safest care of your horses. Additionally, it is not legal for non-veterinarians to administer the sedatives and/or analgesics necessary to make dentistry painless and stress-free for your horse.

We are fully equipped to maintain your horse's oral health including motorized Powerfloat equipment, hand floats and lighted full-mouth speculums. The use of our portable head stand means you don't have to balance a heavy, angular, sleepy horse head on your shoulder while we work! Call us today to schedule a dental appointment and see the difference that a healthy mouth can make for your horse!