



Equine dental care is often neglected. As humans we are always off to the dentists for our 6 month check-ups. Horses are just like us, they can get tooth ache, cavities and gum disease. So... why shouldn't your horse get regular check-ups too? Knowing what goes on in your horse's mouth will help you prevent any discomfort for your best friend.

What is there to know?

It's the same old story... no teeth, no horse. Your horse's teeth are the result of millions of years of evolutionary change. The horse has adapted to the changing environment over the years resulting in a grazing animal. Their teeth have developed to cope with a grass diet - front teeth (incisors) for cutting the grass and back teeth (cheek teeth) for chewing. Their teeth have a high resistance to wear and tear and have irregular surfaces for the continuous grinding motion eating involves. Your horse needs regular check-ups to make sure the teeth are wearing down properly.

Domesticated horses find themselves in conditions very different to those in the wild. These conditions affect the growth and wear of the teeth. Domestication, change in diet and using a bit, alter the way your horse lives, eats and moves which has a significant effect on the teeth.

What do my horses teeth look like?

This picture shows the position of your horse's teeth in the mouth.

How often should the vet check my horse's teeth?

Ideally the vet should check your horse's teeth at least once a year.

Newborn foals should have their mouths checked for any abnormalities. Within a few weeks of life foals will develop four incisors: two at the top and two at the bottom. The vet will need to check if they are erupting properly and that all 24 cheek teeth are coming through. Eventually the 12 premolars will be replaced by permanent teeth. The molars do not have precursors, so these remain throughout the foal's life. Having your foal's teeth checked at such a young age will ensure he becomes accustomed to having his mouth handled.

2-4 year old horses start to produce their permanent teeth. The vet needs to check that these are erupting and coming through properly at the right time, he will also assess if they are causing irritation to the soft tissues (gums) around them.

5 year old horses should have all their permanent teeth. The vet needs to check them to make sure they have all erupted without causing any problems. Canine teeth are often seen in stallions and geldings, these will erupt between the ages of four and five years. Female horses (25-30%) have rudimentary canine teeth. At this age the vet may rasp the cheek teeth to ensure there are no uncomfortable sharp edges.

Horses over 5 years old will have had their permanent teeth for a while. It is essential that your vet sees your horse regularly to look for any problems, rasp any sharp edges or hooks and check for decay or damage. A horse that receives regular dental care will keep his teeth for up to 5 years longer than a horse who does not.

Horses over 15 years old will have a higher incidence of dental problems because of wear and tear and 6-monthly examinations may be necessary to prevent further deterioration.

If you are not sure how old your horse is, your vet will be able to estimate his age by careful examination of the appearance and conformation of the teeth. The teeth can provide information for an 'informed guess' of the age. This picture shows a 4 year old horse.

What will the vet do when he comes to check my horse's teeth? - Problems

The vet will look for a variety of common problems, including:

- Cracked teeth.
- Mouth ulcers and sore areas of mucosa.



- Gum inflammation.
- Problems with tooth eruption.
- Sharp teeth edges and hooks.
- Teeth misalignments, including parrot mouth or sow mouth.
- Wolf teeth interference.

What will the vet do when he comes to check my horse's teeth? - Rasping

Rasping is a very common job for a vet which can be done at home. It involves using various sized rasps to remove sharp enamel points and hooks from cheek teeth, levelling tall or long teeth, rounding and smoothing of teeth to improve the fit of the bit. A dental mouth gag may be used to keep your horses mouth open throughout the procedure - no pain is involved - preventing your horse from biting the vet by accident. Rasping may sometimes involve sedating your horse if he is particularly lively or if extensive work needs to be done - your horse may have to go to an equine hospital if this is the case.

How can I tell if my horse has a problem with his teeth?

If you have ever had problems with your own teeth, you will know how miserable it can make you feel, well horses can feel just the same.

Keep an eye out for abnormal behaviour:

- Aggressive butting or shaking of hay before eating it - your horse will try to knock off the leaves to make chewing easier.
- Drinking less - cold water may cause discomfort to decaying teeth.
- Dropping half-chewed food (quidding) - related to mouth pain or incorrect alignment of teeth.
- Eating food slowly - reflects painful teeth.
- Head shaking or peculiar head carriage while being ridden - indicating discomfort in the mouth and possible dental problems.
- Head-shaking while eating - caused by a painful mouth.
- Putting hay in his water bucket - horses will soak the hay to make it easier to chew and swallow.
- Reluctance to work in collection, 'on the bit' - when the reins pull on the bit, the horse's lips are pulled towards the first cheek teeth, it's essential that this area is kept free from sharp or rough edges.

You will also be able to notice other unusual signs:

- Bad breath (halitosis) - a sign of dental decay, just like humans.
- Drooling excessively - reflects painful teeth.
- Increased incidence of some types of colic.
- Nasal discharges.
- Sores on tongue, lips or gums - a result of sharp points and hooks.
- Swellings on the face or lower jaw.
- Tongue sticking out of mouth - your horse will try and keep his tongue away from sharp teeth edges.
- Weight loss - because your horse is unable to eat properly.

Routine management and regular check-ups will ensure your horses dental health. If you want your horse to be happy and free from pain, make sure his teeth are checked at least once a year and always keep an eye out for any abnormal signs or behaviour.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Dalehead Veterinary Group on (01729) 823538 and we will be happy to advise you.