

## **EQUINE DENTAL CARE AT NVAHS**

The mouth is the first part of the digestive tract and its health is very important to the horse. If a horse is unable to chew effectively they lose important nutrients resulting in weight loss, are at increased risk for colic and may even experience oral pain and discomfort that sometimes go unnoticed until ridden.

Horses have; deep rooted teeth which continue to erupt throughout their life as the chewing surfaces are worn away, a bottom jaw that is narrower than the top and a unique chewing pattern. The horses' normal chewing pattern is outside-to-inside on a slant, determined by matching surfaces on the upper and lower cheek teeth. This chewing pattern, the narrow bottom jaw, and continual erupting teeth are some of the reasons why our horse's mouths develop extremely sharp points.

Add to these our interference such that we modify their diet and eating patterns through domestication and confinement, demand more from our performance horses, beginning at a younger age than ever before, and often select breeding animals without regard to dental considerations. All of these can result in a mouth containing oral ulcers and severe canker like sores on the tongue and cheeks.

These injuries make it very uncomfortable for our horses to chew, eat, and perform under saddle. Another common dental problem we find in our patients is "hooks" and "ramps". These develop when the upper cheek (premolars and molars) teeth are set farther forward than the bottom cheek teeth resulting in no opposing grinding surface. These often result in ulcerations, erosions, abscesses and bone infection.

Horses experiencing oral pain may express any or all of the following:

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

It is important to remember that horses are a prey species and hence very adaptable to many situations. Therefore, a horse does not have to show any of the above indicators to have a mouth full of sharp points.

Preventive care is the best option when it comes to your horse's mouth, both health-wise and economically, as proper dental care not only lengthens the life of your horse but dramatically improves its quality of life.

In order to conduct a thorough exam of the back molars sedation is required, this allows the veterinarian to safely restrain the head and jaw with a mouth speculum. The cheek teeth are examined for sharp enamel points as well as abnormal wear patterns, while the incisors are checked for proper alignment and signs of excessive damage from cribbing or improper chewing pattern. Regular examinations are especially important for older horses or a horse with a missing or broken tooth.

The following chart shows the approximate ages at which different teeth erupt in the mouth. By referring to it you may detect potential abnormalities of your own horse associated with teething. By age 5, most horses have their full complement of adult teeth. An adult male has 40 teeth, a mare 36-40 depending on whether or not she has canines.

Permanent (Adult Teeth)	
1 <sup>st</sup> incisors	2.5 years
2 <sup>nd</sup> incisors	3.5 years
3 <sup>rd</sup> incisors	4.5 years
Canines	4-5 years
Wolf Teeth (1 <sup>st</sup> premolars)	5-6 months
2 <sup>nd</sup> premolars (cheek teeth)	2.5 years
3 <sup>rd</sup> premolars	3 years
4 <sup>th</sup> premolars	4 years
1 <sup>st</sup> molar	9-12 months *oldest molar in mouth*
2 <sup>nd</sup> molar	2 years
3 <sup>rd</sup> molar	3.5-4 years

A horse with a pathological mouth can develop serious dental conditions such as infections of the teeth and gums, extremely long hooks on the molars, lost or fractured teeth, and diastemas. These conditions may require surgical treatment by our veterinarians or referral. Please call to book your horse's annual dental exam and float!

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