

Routine Dental Care for Horses

How your horse's teeth work

Unlike human teeth, a horse's teeth erupt from the gum line continuously throughout their life. The parts of their teeth that meet up (occlusal surfaces), wear naturally while chewing feed material. Any areas that do not line up with other teeth are not worn in the same manner, and thus build up to sharp enamel points over time. These points can get very sharp and make it painful on your horse's cheeks and tongue when chewing or wearing a bit. This may affect your horse's weight and performance. Also, any areas where significant parts of teeth do not line up can create what is called a "wave mouth" over time. This means that the teeth are not wearing evenly and eventually impede the normal chewing motion, making it difficult, even impossible for your horse to chew his/her feed properly. This problem can occur in horses of all ages however it most often occurs in young horses with rapidly erupting teeth or older horses as their teeth expire and fall out. This problem can lead to a variety of serious conditions ranging from weight loss to choke and colic.

Floating teeth

Sharp enamel points and waves, or other malocclusions of your horses teeth, are corrected by what is called "floating". This means we use instruments to file down the areas of the teeth that are causing problems. This is done while your horse is sedated for both the safety of the horse and the veterinarian. Based on the severity of the individual horse's dental problems, the veterinarian that floats your horse's teeth can tell you when that horse will need his/her next float.

Indications that your horse may need to have his/her teeth floated

- You have just started your horse on a bit
- Your horse is dropping feed or you notice partially chewed feed balls where he/she eats (called quidds)
- Your horse takes an unusually long time to eat
- You see whole grains or stems of feed longer than 1/4 inch in your horse's fecal piles
- Your horse is not gaining weight or is losing weight
- Your horse throws his/her head when using a bit or refuses to collect
- Your horse has been treated for a choke or impaction colic
- Your horse drools, has bad breath, nasal discharge, facial swelling, or pus/crust under his/her chin.

Take home message

Routine dental care is necessary to prevent serious health problems for your horse. All horses of all ages should have their teeth examined at least annually to assess if a float or other dental procedure is necessary. Most horses should to have their teeth floated anywhere between once every six to twenty four months depending on their oral conformation and performance expectation.