Routine dental care is essential to your horse’s health. Periodic examination, corrections and regular maintenance are especially necessary for a number of reasons:

• We have modified the horse’s diet and eating patterns through domestication and confinement.
• We demand more from our performance horses (beginning at a younger age) than ever before.
• We often select breeding animals without regard to dental considerations.

Proper dental care has its rewards. Your horse will be more comfortable, will utilize feed more efficiently, may perform better and may even live longer.

The Horse’s Mouth

Horses evolved as grazing animals, and their teeth are perfectly adapted for that purpose. The incisors, or front teeth, have a flat surface curved side to side for shearing off forage. The cheek teeth (including molars and premolars with their wide, flat, roughened surfaces) easily grind the feed to a mash before it is swallowed.

Like humans, horses have two sets of teeth in their lifetimes. The baby teeth, called deciduous teeth, are temporary. The first deciduous incisors may erupt before the foal is born. The last deciduous teeth come in when the horse is about 8 months of age. Only the incisors and first three cheek teeth have deciduous predecessors to the permanent ones. These teeth begin to be replaced by adult teeth around age 2½. By age 5, most horses have their full complement of permanent teeth. A typical adult male horse has 40 permanent teeth, while a typical mare may have 36 to 40 teeth, because mares are less likely to have canine (bridle) teeth.

The following chart shows the approximate ages at which different teeth erupt. During the period of tooth eruption and shedding, some problems may occur. Your veterinarian should be consulted routinely during this time or if you suspect yeast or any other upset. Adult teeth erupt throughout life and are worn down by chewing.

Because the horse’s lower rows of cheek teeth are closer together than the upper rows of cheek teeth and the horse chews with a sideways motion, sharp points form along the edges of the cheek teeth. Points form on the outside (cheek side) of the upper teeth and the tongue side of the lower teeth. These points should be smoothed to prevent damage and ulceration of the cheeks and tongue.

Routine examination and correction is especially important in horses that are missing teeth or whose teeth are not wearing properly because of malalignment. For example, if the front or last cheek teeth are out of alignment, hooks can form. Untreated, these hooks can become long or sharp enough to damage soft tissue. Short hooks or other malocclusions may be corrected with hand instruments. Tall malocclusions may be corrected with motorized instrumentation. Motorized instruments have replaced molar cutters and chisels because there is less chance of tooth damage. Tall malocclusions may require several treatments spread over 12 to 18 months.

Wolf Teeth

Wolf teeth are very small teeth located in front of the second premolar. They rarely appear in the lower jaw. A horse may have one to four, or no wolf teeth. While not all wolf teeth are troublesome, veterinarians routinely remove them to prevent pain or interference with a bit.

The Age Factor

The age of a horse affects the degree of attention and frequency of dental care required. Consider these points:

• Foals should be examined shortly after birth and periodically during the first year to detect and correct congenital dental abnormalities (existing from birth).
• Yearlings have been found to have enamel points sharp enough to damage cheek and tongue tissue. Floating will make them more comfortable.
DENTAL CARE

The Importance of Maintaining the Health of Your Horse’s Mouth

Horses going into training for the first time, especially 2- and 3-year-olds, need a comprehensive dental check-up. Teeth should be floated to remove any sharp points and checked for retained caps. Caps should be removed if they have not shed. This should be done before training begins to prevent training problems related to sharp teeth.

Horses aged 2 to 5 years may require more frequent dental exams than older horses. Deciduous teeth tend to be softer than permanent teeth and may develop sharp enamel points more quickly. Also, there is an extraordinary amount of dental maturation during this period. During this period of adolescent development, 24 deciduous teeth will be shed and replaced by 36 to 40 adult teeth. To prevent malocclusion problems, twice-a-year examinations are appropriate for young horses from birth to 5 years of age.

Mature horses should get a thorough dental examination at least annually to maintain correct dental alignment and to diagnose dental problems as early as possible.

Senior horses (17 years old or older) are at increased risk for developing periodontal disease. This painful disease must be diagnosed early for successful treatment. Also, it is important to maintain a correct bite plane during a horse’s teens in order to ensure a functional grinding surface beyond 20 years of age. Beyond the age of 20, the tooth surfaces may be worn excessively and/or unevenly, and dental alignment correction may be impossible.

Developing Greater Awareness

If a horse starts behaving abnormally, dental problems should be considered as a potential cause. Abnormalities should be corrected and teeth should be floated and maintained as indicated.

Wolf teeth are routinely extracted from performance horses to prevent interference with the bit and prevent associated pain.

Sedatives, local anesthetics and analgesics relax the horse and keep it more comfortable during floating and other dental procedures. Such drugs should be administered only by a veterinarian.

Most equine dental procedures, including basic floating, irreversibly change the horse’s teeth and therefore are most appropriately performed by a veterinarian.

If your equine practitioner finds a loose tooth, he or she may choose to extract it. This may reduce the chance of infection or other problems.

Canine teeth, usually present in mature geldings and stallions, may be gently rounded and smoothed. This procedure is performed to prevent interference with the bit and to reduce the possibility of injury to the horse, the handler, and other horses pastured or stabled with the gelding.

Depending upon the condition of your horse’s teeth, more than one visit from your equine practitioner may be required to get the horse’s mouth in prime working order.

It is important to catch dental problems early. Waiting too long may increase the difficulty of correcting certain conditions or may even make correction impossible.

More Serious Dental Ailments

Serious dental conditions can develop, such as infections of the teeth and gums, extremely long hooks or overgrowths on the cheek teeth, and lost or fractured teeth. These conditions may require advanced dental care and/or extraction by a qualified veterinarian. Your equine practitioner can recommend the best treatment or refer your horse to a dental specialist if indicated.