

Avoiding Dental Problems

Routine dental care is essential to keeping your horse healthy.

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Regular dental exams by a trained professional should be part of your horse's health maintenance program. Young horses need dental care more often than older horses; horses between the age of 2 and 5 should have a dental exam every six months, while horses over five should have an annual exam.

If your veterinarian doesn't offer dental care, ask him or her to recommend someone. Referral equine hospitals and university veterinary schools usually have someone on staff who does dental work.

"There are very good dentists who aren't actually veterinarians, but it's becoming more of a specialized field," says Adam, Cayot, DVM, a veterinarian/dentist with Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital in Ocala, Fla. "State laws are changing, and some states are trying to require a veterinary license to do dentistry."

Before entrusting your horse's dental care to someone other than a vet, ask for certification. You want to know they have been properly trained. The Academy of Equine Dentistry and the International Association of Equine Dentists (IAED) are both good sources of certification.

Keep in mind, if a dentist is not a veterinarian, he or she should practice with the supervision of a veterinarian who is licensed in your state. Only licensed vets are legally able to administer sedatives, which are typically used for dental work.

Signs of Possible Problems

Your horse will often show physical signs that his teeth are causing problems. These may include:

- "Quidding," or dropping food out of the mouth while eating
- Ulcerations on the cheek or tongue
- Resistance or unusual sensitivity to the bit
- Head tossing or opening the mouth while being ridden
- Making unusual movements with the mouth
- Difficulty flexing at the poll

Any of these signs can signal one or more of the following common problems:

Enamel points - sharp edges that can cause ulcerations on the cheek and/or tongue, and affect horses of all ages.

Wave mouth - uneven wear that causes high and low spots in the horse's mouth, preventing the opposing teeth from meeting properly. It is most often seen in horses between the age of 10 and 20.

Hooks - long protuberances that form on part of a tooth when it isn't worn properly by the opposing tooth. It is common in horses with an overbite (parrot mouth) and can affect horses of all ages.

These problems can be remedied by equilibrating the horse's teeth, or "floating" as it is sometimes referred to.

Your equine dentist may use hand tools or motorized equipment. He or she should conduct a thorough examination prior to correcting any problems. Many dentists use a speculum, a metal device that holds the horse's mouth open.