Dental Care for Young Horses

Proper dentistry is an essential component of young horse health care.

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Just as with human children, regular dental care is important in young and growing horses. Proper attention to your horse’s teeth in his early years is important because the equine dentist can discover any potential for problems and address them promptly. This may avoid some serious dental issues when the horse is older.

The horse has hypsodont teeth, which continue to erupt throughout the animal’s life. Regular dental care is important to make sure teeth are in good condition so the horse can get the most nutrition out of his feed, and to address any problems that might interfere with a bit in his mouth.

“"A dental exam on a young horse is very important. The most routine procedure that I perform on a young horse is removal of wolf teeth, however misalignment and retained caps can also be addressed. These exams increase the longevity and quality of a horse’s dentition,” says Eric Evans, DVM, a veterinarian with Peterson & Smith Equine Hospital in Ocala, Florida, who has been doing equine dentistry since 2005.

If you are raising a foal, the veterinarian should examine the baby’s mouth when he/she comes to do the first physical exam shortly after birth. The vet will look to see if the foal has a normal bite. An abnormal bite such as “parrot mouth” (overbite) or “monkey mouth” (underbite) can require special attention as the mouth grows and develops.

During the first five years of the horse’s life, most vets recommend a dental exam twice each year, because many changes are occurring in the horse’s mouth. If the top jaw (maxilla) doesn’t line up correctly with the bottom jaw (mandible), the teeth will wear unevenly. The opposing teeth should come together and meet evenly with equal pressure. If anything is out of alignment, even just a little bit, problems can develop. The equine dentist will palpate the jaw and then manually feel each tooth, typically using a speculum (a type of metal brace) to hold the mouth open. Any rough points or edges will be removed through a process known as “floating” or “equilibrating” the teeth. The dentist will also smooth out any unevenness, such as “ramps” and “waves.”

“Young horses have specific issues that need to be addressed when compared to dealing with a mature dentition,” Dr. Evans points out. “Retained caps, which are remnants of the deciduous tooth, need to be removed to allow the permanent tooth proper eruption space. I also take special care when floating/equilibrating a younger horse because the teeth are general softer. It is easy to "over float" a younger dentition, causing misalignment and detrimental effects to the teeth.”

You’ve probably heard that knowledgeable horsemen tell how old the horse is just by looking at his teeth. This is because the eruption schedule for teeth is very predictable during the first few years of life. Telling the horse’s age by his teeth becomes much less exact as the animal gets older.

After the foal is born, the first incisors and premolars begin to erupt within the first week. The first incisors and premolars are “deciduous,” meaning they are “baby” teeth, which will be shed and replaced by permanent (adult) teeth. The horse will eventually have 12 permanent incisors and 12 to 16 permanent premolars.

Molars don’t start growing in until the horse is a yearling; by the time he’s an adult, most horses have 12 molars.

The average horse will shed 24 teeth and erupt 36 to 44 teeth by the age of four years. The difference in total number depends on sex. Most male horses have four small canine teeth (sometimes referred to as "bridle" teeth), but don’t be surprised if you have a mare who never develops canines. It’s common for female horses to have no canines.

Some—but not all—horses have “wolf teeth,” small adult teeth that can erupt anywhere from the age of about six months up until the horse is two years old. A horse can have anywhere from one to four wolf teeth, although four is considered highly unusual. Since wolf teeth can cause pain if they bump against the bit, most dentists will remove them before the horse goes into training. There’s no need to worry about extracting these small teeth, since they don’t serve any purpose in chewing food.
After the age of five, an annual dental exam is usually sufficient, unless the horse has specific dental issues.

Further Reading
Avoiding Equine Dental Problems
The Basics of Equine Dentistry