

Tacoma Equine Hospital

3112 – 156th Street E. Tacoma, WA 98446 ♦ 253.535.6999

DENTISTRY

One of the most important things you can do to help your horse live a long, happy and healthy life is to take care of their teeth.

The practice of veterinary dentistry has advanced quickly in the last few years. There are more veterinarians who realize the benefits of and are trained to practice high quality dental procedures, as well as a growing number of specialists who do referral procedures like root canals and periodontal corrections. The new power equipment has made it easier, safer and quicker to float teeth and to correct major imbalances in the mouth. Overall, the standards have been raised for dental care and with your help your horse will be the beneficiary.

ANATOMY

A review of anatomy will help you understand the basics of dentistry. As you can see by the diagrams, horses have 4 rows of molars and 2 rows of incisors. In addition, some horses have 2 small front upper molars called wolf teeth. These small wolf teeth are usually removed at a young age as they interfere with bit comfort. Typically, the male horse has four canines while the female usually does not.

Horses drop baby teeth like humans. Their baby teeth (all incisors and the front 3 molars) fall out at intervals between 3 and 5 years of age. We can tell a horse's age with some accuracy because of these predictable eruptions and wear patterns of the teeth.

PROBLEMS IN THE MOUTH

Because a horse's lower jaw is narrower than the upper jaw and they chew side-to-side, the cheek side of the upper teeth and the tongue side of the lower teeth never touch each other. These two sides of the teeth get sharp points on them whereas the parts of the teeth that are in contact with each other wear down smooth. The sharp points can interfere with bit contact while riding and also make it painful for horses to eat as they can cut their cheeks easily. Horses with sharp teeth or painful mouths will show bad behavior under saddle or be skinnier than they should be because they can't utilize the food they eat. It has been shown that "wild horses" or horses that eat a more coarse grass get smaller sharp points that don't develop as quickly compared with horses on soft foods like grain.

"Floating" a horse's teeth renders them smooth and even and this should be done, or at least checked, once yearly.

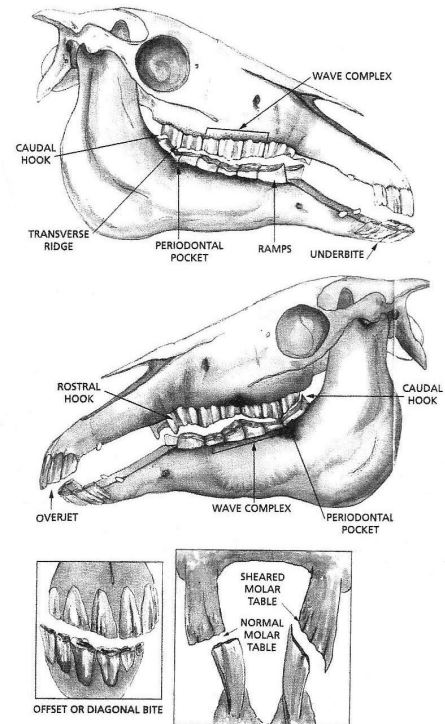
While we're in there filing sharp points away, we may notice other imbalances going on. A horse not only chews side-to-side, but his jaw also slides from back to front as he grinds. In actuality, he chews in a big circle. Any kind of misalignment or overgrowth of teeth can interrupt this motion, limiting the chewing ability of the horse, and therefore impacting his health.

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Two of the most common misalignments causing overgrowths are overbites and underbites. In an overbite or “parrot mouth” horse, the top incisors and molars are farther forward than the bottom incisors and molars. The teeth that aren’t rubbing against each other (the front upper molars, back lower molars and all of the incisors) continue to grow unimpeded and form “hooks”. This interrupts the circular chewing motion of the horse and can cause pain, reluctance to turn under saddle and weight loss. Underbites cause exactly the opposite hooks, on the lower front molars and upper back molars. The effect is the same: lack of circular chewing motion. Underbites are seen frequently in miniature horses.

“Shear mouth,” as diagramed above, is an uncommon problem, but will interrupt chewing motion as much as the bites listed above. This is where the lower jaw is either off-center of the upper jaw or just abnormally narrow compared to the upper. Therefore, one or both sides of the upper molars grow extra long.



A common older horse tooth malformation is called a “wave mouth,” also diagramed above. The adjacent molars in the horse’s mouth erupt at different times and therefore some teeth are “older” and have been in use longer than others. These older teeth begin to slow in their eruption rate whereas next door a younger molar is erupting faster. The chewing surface becomes uneven as a result and appears “wave-like.” Not only does this disrupt the chewing motion of the horse, but it can also cause increased pressure on the weak parts of the teeth, encourage tooth root decay and tooth loss.

The incisors (front teeth) and how they are aligned are clues as to how the molars are aligned. Any impedance to that all-important circular chewing motion will be illustrated on the incisors.

PREVENTION

Once all of these misalignments form, they are somewhat fixable but the damage may have already been done. Arthritis of the jaw, loose or broken teeth and mouth infections are some of the problems that can occur when uneven teeth impede proper mastication for a long period of time. The key to good oral hygiene and a longer, healthier life for your horse is prevention. Call us and get your horse’s teeth checked once yearly and floated if necessary. Tacoma Equine Hospital is proud to be committed to your horse’s dental health and uses a “Powerfloat” to perform dental floats and rebalancing. This is a hand drill that has been adapted for teeth floating by positioning a circular spinning carbide blade at the end of a long shaft. Don’t hesitate to come by if you’d like to take a peek at this piece of modern technology or talk to us in further detail about your horse’s teeth and the process of “floating.”