

DENTAL CARE FOR HORSES

General Information

Dental care is an important part of horse management. Dental problems are best prevented by dental examination once or twice a year.

The teeth of horses continually grow throughout the animal's life. The teeth can be used to estimate a horse's age. However, certain dental problems, such as malocclusion (upper and lower teeth do not meet), broken teeth and abnormal wear (as from cribbing), can make it difficult to estimate a horse's age.

To do a quick examination of your horse's teeth:

1. Lift the upper lip and observe the gums and upper incisors. This is also where lip tattoos are located and where you can assess your horse's membrane color.
2. Pull down the lower lip with one hand and use the other hand to pull out the corner of the mouth. Observe the first few molars for hooks and points. These teeth generally reflect the state of the other molars.

Dental problems can lead to eating difficulties, unwillingness to accept the bit, mouth injuries or sinus infections. Signs of dental disease include weight loss, difficulty chewing, dropping hay or grass while chewing, head tossing during riding, nasal discharge, facial swelling, and many whole pieces of grain in the manure.

Important Points in Treatment

- **Floating:** A horse's teeth periodically need to be filed down or floated to remove sharp points on the outside edges of the upper molars and inside edges of the lower molars. The average horse requires floating at least once a year to prevent injury to the cheeks and tongue. "Hooks" on mismatched teeth may need to be cut and smoothed.
- **Wolf teeth:** Wolf teeth are the rudimentary first upper premolars located near the large upper second premolars. These first appear in late yearlings. Biting problems are more likely if the wolf teeth are small and loose. Wolf tooth removal is relatively simple.
- **Tartar:** Accumulations of yellow-brown tartar or calculus around the base of the teeth should be periodically removed to prevent gum disease and tooth loss. Tartar usually accumulates around the canine teeth and occasionally the incisors.
- **Infection:** Infection of an upper tooth can spread to the bony compartment between the roof of the mouth and the eye (maxillary sinus), causing sinus infection and pain, and a discharge from one nostril. Infection of a lower tooth can cause swelling along the jaw bone. Horses with tooth infection may

have an unpleasant “rotten” odor about the mouth or emanating from the nostril on the same side as the sinus infection.

- **Malocclusion:** When a tooth is missing, the tooth in the opposite arcade continues to grow and may require periodic cutting to prevent mouth injury and to allow normal chewing.
- **Feed retention:** Occasionally a horse retains feed in its mouth between the teeth and cheek. This packed accumulation of feed can stretch the cheek, forming a pouch. Daily removal of accumulated feed from this area may help resolve the problem.