

# Dentistry for your horse

By: Crystal McLeod, RAHT

Routine dental care is essential to your horses in health. Periodic examinations and regular maintenance, such as floating, are especially necessary today 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 front teeth, known as incisors, function to shear off forage. The cheek teeth, including the molars and premolars with their wide, flat, grveled surfaces, easily grind the feed to a mash before it is swallowed.

Like humans, horses get two sets of teeth in their lifetime. The baby teeth, also called deciduous teeth, are temporary. The first deciduous incisors may erupt before the foal is born. The last baby teeth come in when the horse is about 8 months of age. These teeth begin to be replaced by adult teeth around age 2 1/2. By age 5, most horses have their full complement of permanent teeth. An adult male horse has 40 permanent teeth. A mare may have between 36-40, because mares are less likely to have canine (bridle) teeth.

Horses may suffer from many dental problems. The most common include:

- Sharp enamel points forming on cheek teeth, causing lacerations of cheeks and tongue
- Retained caps (deciduous teeth that are not shed)
- Discomfort caused by bit contact with the wolf teeth
- Hooks forming on the upper and lower cheek teeth
- Long and/or sharp canine (bridle) teeth interfering with the insertion or removal of the bit
- Lost and/or broken teeth
- Abnormal or uneven bite planes
- Excessively worn teeth
- Abnormally long teeth
- Infected teeth and/or gums
- Misalignment/poor apposition (can be due to congenital defects or injury)
- Periodontal (gum) disease

## **RECOGNIZING DENTAL PROBLEMS**

Horses with dental problems may show obvious signs, such as pain or irritation, or they may show no noticeable signs at all. That is due to the fact that some horses simply adapt to their discomfort. For this reason, periodic dental examinations are essential. Indicators of dental problems include:

- Loss of feed from mouth while eating, difficulty with chewing, or excessive salivation
- Loss of body condition
- Large or undigested feed particles (long stems or whole grain) in manure
- Head tilting or tossing, bit chewing, tongue lolling, fighting the bit, or resisting bridling
- Poor performance, such as lugging on the bridle, failing to turn or stop, even bucking
- Foul odor from mouth or nostrils, or traces of blood from the mouth
- Nasal discharge or swelling of the face, jaw, or mouth tissues

## **FLOATING & PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE**

Every dental exam provides the opportunity to perform routine preventative dental maintenance. The end result is a healthier, more comfortable horse.

Routine maintenance of a horse's teeth has been historically referred to as "floating." Floating removes the sharp enamel points, correcting malocclusion, balancing the dental arcades and correcting other dental problems.

When turned out on pasture, horses graze almost continuously, picking up dirt and grit in the process. This, plus the silicate in grass, wears down the teeth. Stabled horses, however, may not give their teeth the same workout. Feedings are more apt to be scheduled, not continuous, and include processed grains and hays. Softer feeds require less chewing. This may allow the horse's teeth to become excessively long or to wear unevenly. 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 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 misalignment.

## **THE AGE FACTOR**

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

- 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 been 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. Twenty-four teeth will be shed and replaced by 36 to 40 adult teeth. To prevent mal-eruption 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 a 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.
- Horses over 20 years of age should receive a dental evaluation and nutritional counseling at least annually to maintain their conditioning and quality of life. With routine dental care, many horses will maintain a functional dentition into their third and fourth decades of life.

## **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 its associated pain.
- Sedatives, local anesthetics, and analgesics can 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 extract it. This may reduce the chance of infection or other problems.

- Canine teeth, usually present in mature geldings and stallions, may be 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 horse.
- Depending upon the condition of your horse's teeth, more than one visit from your equine practitioner may be required to get the 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.