



Dentistry: Start to Finish

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The first oral exam should take place during the post-natal visit of a foal. The exam involves looking at the head for symmetry and a quick peek into the mouth to observe any teeth that are present. Another examination should be performed at weaning (approximately 6 months of age). By this time the foal should have a total of 8 incisors and 12 temporary molars. Again the foal's head should be examined for symmetry and a brief look into the mouth to insure proper sequence of eruption and proper alignment of incisors. The benefit to the early examinations is early detection of severe malocclusion. Treatment at such a young age often results in a better prognosis. During the next 12 months while the yearling is growing so quickly, it is a good idea to have the teeth checked every six months for sharp points and abnormal wear. Wolf teeth, which are present in both male and female horses, are usually removed before that horse enters training.

From age 2 to 4 years the young horse faces many changes, from losing teeth to wearing a bridle. Dental exams during this time are of utmost importance. The incisors, all of which erupt by 6-9 months of age, begin to be replaced by the permanent teeth. The time frame for permanent incisor eruption is 2.3, 3.5 and 4.5 years of age. Generally this is an uneventful process and may even go completely unnoticed. However, occasionally one of these baby teeth will be retained. Retained incisors need to be removed to prevent abnormal eruption of the permanent incisors. A similar process will occur with the premolars or "cheek teeth" during the same time period. The cheek teeth should also be examined for retained caps. Frequently the new or permanent premolars have very sharp edges. These teeth often need to be floated to prevent ulcerations from developing on the cheek and or tongue. These sharp teeth may also lead to problems with training. You see the time frame for shedding caps coincides with the time frame that many young horses have started training. Simultaneously these young horses are losing baby teeth, erupting permanent teeth and starting to wear a bit, which emphasizes the importance of the routine dental examination at this age.

By age four to five years most horses have lost all of their baby teeth, all of the permanent teeth have erupted and they have been exposed to training and wearing a bit. During the ages of 4 to ten years horses begin to show incongruities in the wear of their teeth. In other words the occlusal surface or grinding table may begin to show discrepancies in alignment. Many of these discrepancies are considered normal, but must be corrected. Common terms for some of these discrepancies are; ramps, hooks, points and waves. Routine dental care will allow many of the defects to be easily corrected. The canine teeth should be addressed during this life stage as well. While more commonly seen in the male horse the canines may also be present in the female. The canines rarely require more than a quick rounding off, this will prevent ulcerations to the mouth of the horse and the hand of the person biting the horse.



As the horse continues to age and mature the growth of the teeth begins to slow and the teeth become more brittle. By age ten to eighteen small occlusal incongruities become more significant problems. Uneven wear patterns put abnormal stress on the teeth and may lead to periodontal disease or even fractured teeth. Dental examinations should be performed at least once per year but some horses may require more attention. Ramps and hooks become more common in this age group due to the normal wear of the teeth and wave mouth is also more prominent. Incisor problems are more common at this age also. These changes are associated with abnormal wear patterns on the cheek teeth which then cause abnormal wear on the incisors. Correction of the abnormalities of the cheek teeth will correct the abnormal wear of the incisors but if the problems have not been addressed in a timely manner some incisor correction may also be necessary.

The abnormalities that develop in the mature horse will only progress in the geriatric horse. Although it is often stated that a horse's teeth continually grow, that statement is incorrect. The teeth continually erupt. In other words the teeth start off at a certain size once fully developed, by age five, let's say 75mm. Each year 2-3 mm of tooth is worn away so by the time the horse is 25, 40-60 mm of tooth has been worn away. Without the long root, called reserve crown, the tooth loses its strength. Teeth begin to shift and break. Periodontal disease becomes common. Periodontal disease often results in tooth loss, even if it is treated. Tooth loss may also occur without periodontal disease. It is important to address tooth loss so that the opposing tooth does not grow into the empty space causing the teeth to lock together during the normal chewing cycle. Another complication of the tooth being worn down to the reserve crown is that the teeth become soft because the reserve crown does not contain enamel. This leads to smooth teeth which lead to severe wear abnormalities in a very short time. Once the teeth no longer have the enamel for strength a diet change is mandatory.

Equine dentistry is important at all life stages. Dental care is one of many facets of caring for your animal that will encourage a long and healthy life.