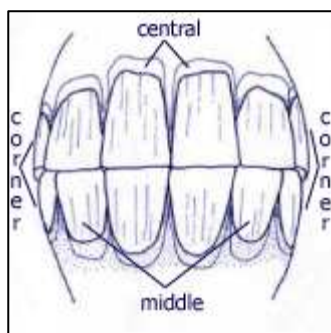


All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth

Heather Landrey, DVM

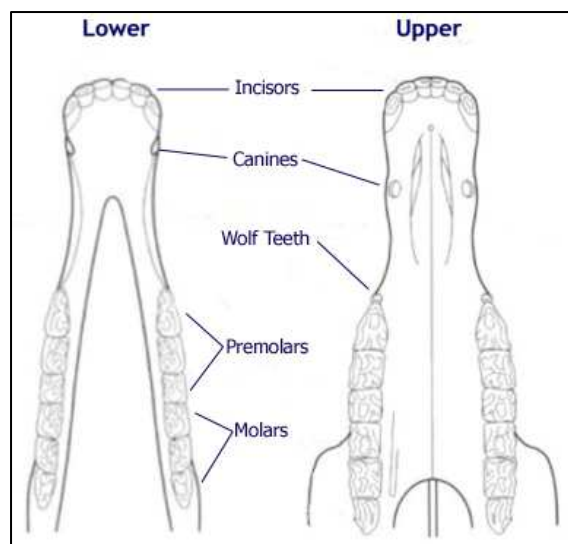
As we all know, children lose their baby teeth when their adult teeth are ready to erupt. But did you realize that the same process occurs in a horse's mouth? That's right; horses have deciduous or baby incisors and premolars which are replaced by permanent or adult incisors and premolars. As the permanent tooth erupts it wears away the root of the deciduous tooth and eventually pushes the remnant of the baby tooth out. This remnant of the baby tooth is often referred to as a "cap". The molars, wolf teeth and canines do not develop caps because they erupt as permanent teeth with no deciduous teeth to replace.



The incisors are the teeth in the front of the horse's mouth. There are twelve incisors total; six on top and six on the bottom. The central incisors are the first to be shed, and this process usually occurs at about 2½ to 3 years of age. At around 3½ to 4 years of age, the caps of the middle incisors are shed. The corner deciduous incisors are lost between 4½ and 5 years of age. In each case, the caps of the lower arcade are shed before the corresponding upper arcade.

As previously stated the incisors are the teeth in the front of the mouth, the other teeth are collectively called cheek teeth. There are a total of 24 cheek teeth, 12 in the upper jaw and 12 in the lower jaw. The cheek teeth consist of molars and premolars. From age 2 years to 4 years the deciduous premolars will be replaced with permanent premolars. The first set of premolar caps are shed at 2½ years, the second set at 3 years, and the third set at 4 years. Unlike the incisors, the upper and lower premolars are lost close to the same time.

Most deciduous teeth are lost without complication, but occasionally problems can occur. For instance, when a cap becomes loose, food can become impacted between the cap and the permanent tooth causing pain. A second potential complication is when a cap is retained. Retained deciduous caps are those which do not fall out when the permanent tooth replacing it has erupted. The retained cap puts pressure on both the upper and lower permanent teeth and causes discomfort and chewing complications. Another complication arises when a cap becomes fractured. The fractured cap will have sharp edges which might cut the soft tissue of the mouth or put pressure on the gingiva (gums).



Once identified, dental problems associated with caps are easy to resolve. Dental care for the young horse is important for more than just its health and well being. A horse with pain from a tooth may develop some bad behaviors while working as a result of trying to escape pain. If the problem persists, the behavior may become a habit-and we all know young horses in training do not need any additional excuses to learn bad habits. Regular dental examinations, with the first exam prior to starting a horse in training, will insure that the mouth is not a source of discomfort and allow you to focus more on teaching the horse good habits.