



Ballybrown Equine Clinic



Ballybrown Equine Clinic, Ballybrown, Clarina, Co. Limerick, Ireland.

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DENTAL CARE

Routine dental care is essential to your horse's health. Periodic examination, corrections and regular maintenance, are especially necessary for a number of reasons:

- We have modified the horse's diet and eating patterns through domestications 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 HORSES MOUTH

Horses are grazing animals, and their teeth are perfectly adapted for that purpose. The forward 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, called deciduous teeth, are temporary. The first deciduous incisors may erupt before the foal is born. The last deciduous teeth come in when the foal is about 8 months of age. Only the incisors and the first three cheek teeth have deciduous precursors to the permanent ones. These teeth begin to be replaced by adult teeth around 2 1/2 years of age. By the age of five, most horses have their full complement of permanent teeth. An adult horse has 40 permanent teeth. A mare may have between 36 and 40, because mares are less likely to have canine (bridle) teeth.

The following chart shows the approximate ages at which teeth are first visible in the mouth (erupt). By referring to it, you may detect potential abnormalities of your own horse associated with teething. It should be noted that there can be significant variation between individuals and breeds in when teeth come.

DECIDUOUS (BABY TEETH)

First incisors(centrals)	Birth or 1 week
Second incisors(intermediates)	4-6 weeks
Third incisors(corners)	6-9 months
1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd premolars (cheek teeth)	2 weeks for all premolars.

PERMANENT (ADULT TEETH)

First incisors (centrals)	2 ½ years.
Second incisors (intermediates)	3 ½ years.
Third incisors (corners)	4 ½ years.
Canine (bridle)	4 -5 years.
Wolf teeth (1 st Premolars)	5-6 months.
2 nd premolars (1 st cheek teeth)	2 ½ years.
3 rd premolars (2 nd cheek teeth)	3 years.
4 th premolars (3 rd cheek teeth)	4 years.
1 st molars (4 th cheek teeth)	9-12 months.
2 nd molars (5 th cheek teeth)	2 years.
3 rd molars (6 th cheek teeth)	3 ½ -4 years.

COMMON DENTAL PROBLEMS

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 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.

RECOGNISING DENTAL PROBLEMS

Horses with dental problems may show obvious signs, such as pain or irritation, or they may show no noticeable signs at all. This 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 grains) 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 odour from mouth or nostrils, or traces of blood from the mouth.
- Nasal discharge or swelling of the face, jaw, or mouth tissues.
- Oral exam should be an essential part of the annual physical examination by your vet. Every dental exam provides the opportunity to perform routine preventative dental maintenance. The end result is a healthier, more comfortable horse.

PREVENTATIVE MAINTANCE

Routine maintenance of horse's teeth has been historically referred to a "Rasping". Rasping removes the sharp enamel points and can help create a more even bite plane. Routine examination and maintenance should also include identification and correction of any abnormalities such as those listed previously under "Common Dental Problems".

When turned out to pasture, horses browse 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 likely to be scheduled, not continuous, and to include processed grains and hays. Softer feeds require less chewing. This may allow the horses teeth to become long or to wear unevenly. Adult horse's teeth erupt throughout their life and are worn off by chewing.

Unfortunately, cheek teeth tend to develop sharp enamel points even under normal grazing conditions. Because the horse's lower jaw is narrower than its upper jaw and the horse grinds its feed with sideways motion, sharp points tend to form along the edges. Points form on the cheek side of the upper teeth and the tongue side of the lower teeth. These points should be rasped to prevent them from cutting the cheeks and tongue.

Routine maintenance is especially important in horses that have lost a tooth, or whose teeth are in poor apposition and do not fit well together well. Normally, contact with the apposing tooth keeps biting surfaces equal. When cheek teeth are out of alignment, hooks can form.

If left unchecked, these hooks can become long enough to penetrate the hard or soft palate. Small hooks can be removed with rasps. Longer hooks are usually removed with molar cutters or a dental chisel.

WOLF TEETH

Wolf teeth are very small teeth located in front of the second premolar and do not have long roots that set them firmly in the jaw bone. They rarely appear in the lower jaw. A horse may have one to four wolf teeth or none at all. While not all wolf teeth are troublesome, vets routinely remove them to prevent pain or interference from the bit.

THE AGE FACTOR

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The age of the horse affects the degree of attention and frequency of the 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 rasped 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 problems related to sharp teeth.
- Even yearlings have been found to have enamel points sharp enough to damage cheek and tongue tissue. Rasping may improve feed efficiency and make the horse more comfortable.
- Horses two to five 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 amount of dental maturation during this period. Twenty four teeth will be shed and replaced during this time, with the potential for 12 to 16 teeth to be erupting simultaneously. Horses in this age group should be examined twice a year.
- Even the best dental program may not be able to solve or alleviate all the young horses teething discomfort.

DEVELOPING GREATER AWARENESS

- If a horse is behaving abnormally, dental problems should be considered as a potential cause.
- Abnormalities should be corrected and teeth should be rasped and maintained as indicated.
- Wolf teeth are routinely extracted from performance horses to prevent interference with the bit and its associated pain.
- Sedatives and local analgesics relax the horse and keep it comfortable during rasping and other dental procedures. Such drugs should be only administered only by your vet.
- If your equine practitioner finds a loose tooth, he or she may choose to extract it. This may reduce the chance of infection or other problems.
- Depending on the age and condition of the horse's teeth more than one visit might be needed from your equine practitioner to get the mouth in prime working order.
- It is important to catch dental problems early.

MORE SERIOUS DENTAL AILMENTS

Serious dental conditions can develop, such as infections of the teeth and gums, extremely long hooks on the molars; lost or fractures teeth, and others. These conditions may require surgical treatment and/ or extraction by a qualified vet. Your equine practitioner can recommend the best treatment or refer you to a specialist if indicated.

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