



RESPONSIBLE  
HORSE OWNER BOOKLET

# CARING FOR YOUR HORSE'S TEETH





# INTRODUCTION



**Good dental care is essential to your horse’s well-being, to prevent disease and to ensure they are comfortable when they are ridden.**

Prevention is always better than cure, so ensure that your horse has regular dental checks from a vet or suitably qualified equine dental technician. Monitoring your horse for signs of any dental discomfort is crucial being mindful that some horses, even with advanced dental disease, will suffer in silence.

Throughout this guide we will cover the anatomy of the horses mouth, the signs to look out for if your horse is suffering from dental disease, what to expect at a dental examination and what sort of problems can be found at this examination.

This guide is part of a series covering a range of different topics to help you keep your horses healthy.

For more information and to gain access to the rest of the series, please visit our website:

[www.healthyhorses.co.uk](http://www.healthyhorses.co.uk)





# ANATOMY OF THE HORSES MOUTH

**Designed to chew rough fibre for over 18 hours a day, a horse's teeth are very hard wearing. This diet, together with the horse's chewing action, wears his teeth down at a rate of approximately 2-3 mm per year. To compensate for this wear a horse's teeth continue to erupt through the gums into the mouth over time until he reaches an age when there is simply nothing more left to erupt. When this occurs he simply loses his teeth.**

In the wild the horse's own chewing action generally wears his teeth evenly to prevent sharp edges and spikes from forming over time. However, as it is now more normal for us to stable our horses and feed them concentrates, their normal chewing activity is reduced which can result in sharp edges forming, causing discomfort and eating problems. Equally, expecting our horses to work in bridles puts other pressures on their mouths, which wouldn't normally happen in the wild.

## **Anatomy of the horse's mouth**

**The horse has a total of 36 teeth with males having additional canine teeth, which are not normally present in mares or fillies. Additionally, some horses develop 'wolf teeth', which are small functionless teeth that can erupt just in front of the first cheek tooth. The incisor or front teeth are designed for grazing and biting at grass, whilst the cheek teeth or molars, which extend to the level of the eye, are responsible for grinding feed.**



# HOW CAN I SPOT AND PREVENT DENTAL PROBLEMS?

## How can I prevent problems?

- There are 2 key considerations to prevent dental problems; regular check-ups and ensuring that your horse's diet contains enough long fibre.
- For youngsters it is sensible to start routine dental care in the first year of life, with check-ups every year thereafter.
- Once your horse reaches twelve years of age, or if he has abnormal dental conformation, the time between check-ups should be reduced to every six months.
- Such check-ups should be performed by a vet or suitably qualified equine dental technician.

- You can help your horse by providing at least half of his diet as good quality long fibre. If you have an older horse, he may require special attention with his diet, especially if he is missing teeth and struggles to chew long fibre. Fibre replacements offer a good solution in such cases, but again, speak to your vet with any concerns or to an equine nutritionist for feeding advice.

## How do I know if my horse has a problem?

**Many horses will suffer silently from dental disease so it is important to have regular check-ups to ensure their mouth is healthy. Signs that can indicate there is a problem are:**

- Halitosis (bad smelling breath)
- Quidding - dropping partially chewed food particularly over the stable door or around the feed bucket
- Reduced appetite/difficulty eating/slow eating
- Food packing within cheeks
- Poorly digested food in droppings
- Weight loss
- Difficulties when ridden such as an unsteady head carriage



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# THE DENTAL EXAMINATION

## What to expect at the Examination

**Firstly your vet or equine dental technician will ask some questions about your horse, his eating habits and any problems you may have noticed as well as perform a brief examination of his head to check for symmetry and swellings. A gag will be used to allow a full visual and manual examination of the whole mouth including the teeth, palate, tongue, cheeks, bars and the lips.**

Generally, a routine rasping will then be carried out to remove any sharp edges on the cheek teeth. In most cases this is done with a variety of hand held rasps. If there are large overgrowths or the mouth requires more advanced treatment, motorised equipment and/or more advanced tools may be used.

Don't be alarmed if it is suggested that your horse would benefit from sedation to allow even the most minor of procedures and rasping. Sedation is standard for more advanced procedures that may be painful or time consuming.

Speak to your vet about sedation and to ask any questions you would like answered. They may be able to prescribe an oral sedative, which you can give before the appointment; however in many instances your vet will give the sedation directly into the vein. This allows your horse to relax ensuring the procedure can be carried out effectively and safely for all parties including your horse, the handler and the vet or equine dental technician. It is important that you withhold food and water until your horse has woken up sufficiently and your vet will advise you on this at the time.



# WHAT WILL THE EXAMINATION SHOW?

**Early detection and treatment of dental abnormalities is vital as one problem tends to lead to a variety of problems in time, which can be more difficult to correct. Some problems may need to be treated over a period of time rather than at one examination. For example a large overgrowth will need to be reduced in stages to avoid the sensitive structures within the tooth from becoming exposed.**

**Some problems that are regularly seen are:**

- Abnormal wear with sharp enamel edges on both the lower and upper cheek teeth. If pronounced this can cause painful ulcers and erosions on the soft tissues of the cheek or tongue
- Overgrowths secondary to a misaligned jaw (parrot mouth) or as a result of a missing tooth
- Fractured, displaced, loose or missing cheek teeth

- Diastema (gaps between the teeth where food collects) causing gum disease
- Caries: tooth decay
- Tooth root abscess
- Retained deciduous (baby) teeth
- Blind (unerupted) or abnormally large or displaced wolf teeth
- Abnormalities of the incisors

# WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW?

**What should I do now?**

- Be aware of when your horse last received any dental care and when his next check-up is due
- Monitor your horse for signs of discomfort, being mindful that some horses, even with advanced dental disease, will suffer in silence

**Where can I go for further information?**

- Contact your vet or find a qualified equine dental technician if you have any concerns, however small they may seem
- BEVA website - [www.beva.org.uk](http://www.beva.org.uk)
- British Association Of Equine Dental Technicians - [www.BAEDT.com](http://www.BAEDT.com)



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