

Greenville Veterinary Clinic

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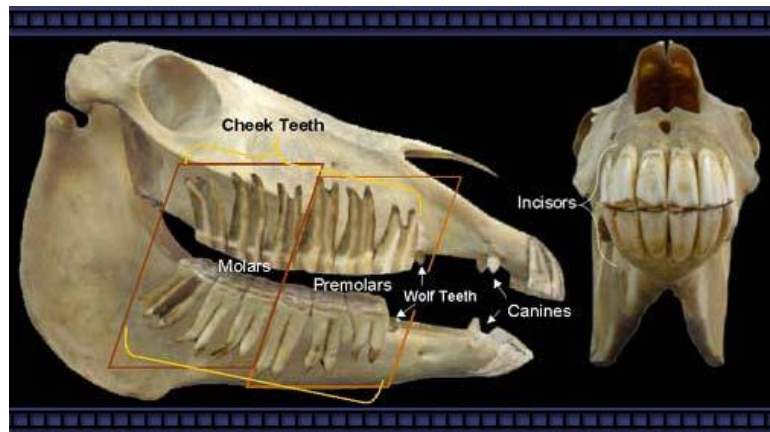
Equine Dentistry, Straight from the Horse's Mouth

By Dr. Kristin McLaughlin



The horse's teeth evolved millions of years ago, adapted to a life of grazing tall grasses on the plains. The way our horses live now is very different from their ancestral roots, both in the forages and grains they eat and the demands placed on them for work and sport, with much of our communication provided through the bits we place in their mouths. Additionally, improvements in husbandry, diet, deworming, and preventative medicine mean our horses live longer than they ever have before, many outliving the teeth they were born with. It is for all these reasons that we need to understand and take care of our horses' mouth on a regular basis.

The horse has 36-44 permanent teeth, with variation in the presence of canine and "wolf" teeth. The incisors, or front teeth, are designed for clipping grass and the molars, or cheek teeth, are designed for grinding this roughage into easily digestible particles. Because horses, unlike cows and sheep, do not have a rumen, this chewing is arguably one of the most



important parts of the digestive process. The teeth are uniquely designed to do their job. They have a complex surface pattern like a nut-cracker or file that is continuously worn down as they chew. To prevent premature tooth loss, the root (which is nearly *four inches* long in youngsters) continues to erupt from the gum line throughout life. In essence, the teeth are continually growing as the surface is continually worn down.

In a perfect world this process happens evenly and smoothly throughout their lives, however dental abnormalities (similar to those we correct with braces) may cause uneven wear, and parts of the teeth grow longer than others eventually forming sharp, dagger-like, points. These points then cut into the inside of your horse's cheek and tongue as he tries to eat and as you use a bit in his mouth. Equine dentistry is aimed at alleviating this source of constant pain as well as correcting the abnormalities that cause it in the first place.

The doctors at Greenville Veterinary Clinic now use power dental tools to make the process easier for both you and your horse because not all equine dentistry is created equal. By using power tools, we reduce the time your horse needs to be sedated while providing a smoother, more thorough and long-

lasting float. We can take the points down at an angle to provide the longest interval between necessary floating. With the slim-line head we can effectively float the teeth at the very back molars (often missed without use of a speculum and sedation) to make sure his mouth is as comfortable as possible. For geriatric horses, the smooth action of the rotating float is more gentle on their delicate teeth than the back and forth motion of hand tools.



What happens during a dental appointment?

First we examine your horse to make sure it is safe to sedate him. Then we give a mild sedative to relax him when we go into the mouth with a float. His head will be heavy, so we prop it on a head rest. All people should wear protective gear including ear plug and masks to prevent inhalation of tooth dust. We place a “speculum” in the mouth to hold the jaws apart and prevent any loss of fingers. We then examine the mouth, show you any abnormalities present, and float. This sounds like a contractor’s drill but after the initial surprise, most horses tolerate the sound extremely well. If needed, we then take the speculum out and float the incisors, or front teeth. You can feel the difference from beginning to end. Your horse will be sleepy for about an hour after sedation and should not be fed during this time. We may recommend using bute for a few days in the case of extensive dental work.

When Should You Schedule a Dental Visit?

All horses receive a complimentary mouth check during routine vaccination appointments. Often, a middle-aged horse with a good bite will only need floating every 1-2 years, and we will make a recommendation at that time. Younger horses often have very sharp points that may interfere with early training or retained caps (baby teeth) that interfere with eruption of permanent molars. Older horses may be losing teeth and have higher risk of tooth root and sinus infections, so they should be checked every 6-12 months.



Several conditions that should make you suspicious your horse’s teeth need immediate work include “quidding” (dropping feed), weight loss despite good appetite and plenty of food available, certain kinds of colic, choke, discharge from one nostril or the other, or non-healing sores over the tooth roots. These can all be the consequence of bad teeth. The good news, however, is that routine checks and dental work can prevent these problems from ever occurring!

So the next time your vet is out on the farm, be sure to have him or her look inside your horse’s mouth.