

# Dental essentials

All horses and ponies, ridden or not, require at least a basic level of dental care. XL Equine vets explain why and what's involved

**D**entistry is an essential and important part of the health care of your horse, and his teeth should be examined at least once a year. In some individuals, particularly those with dental abnormalities, dental work may be required more frequently.

Qualified veterinary surgeons are able to provide sedation, pain relief and local anaesthesia as required during dental work, allowing a more thorough examination and treatment, and less pain and stress to your horse. This can also be safer for the horse, veterinary surgeon and the handler.

## Why is dental care a must?

Recent studies have shown that up to 80% of all domestic horses have significant dental abnormalities. Dental problems are one of the

biggest problems in ageing horses – once they start to lose their teeth, they can't eat so efficiently.

During the course of evolution, horses' teeth have adapted to chew grass and fibre,

but in doing so the teeth wear down at a rate of 2-3mm per year. This wear is balanced by eruption of the teeth at an equal rate, until the horse reaches its mid to late twenties, when all of the reserve crown will have erupted and the teeth begin to fall out.

The lower jaw of a horse is narrower than the upper jaw. When a horse grazes at pasture, the natural circular action required to eat grass brings the chewing surface of the opposing teeth into contact and the teeth wear down evenly. When a horse eats hay or hard feed, he does not need the same circular action to chew these



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

XL Equine is a group of 35 independently owned equine veterinary practices who work together. To find out more about equine dentistry, and other treatments and conditions, visit [xlequine.co.uk](http://xlequine.co.uk)

'softer' feeds and the result is that the outer edges of the top molars and the inner edges of the lower molars do not come into contact and don't wear down. The end result is sharp enamel edges that cause ulceration and pain.

Centuries of cross-breeding horses with differing head sizes has made dental abnormalities, such as hooks, overcrowding and abnormally positioned teeth, very common. If a tooth is even partially unopposed by its counterpart in the other jaw, then large overgrowths will quickly form, causing pain and impeding chewing.

Compounding these problems, we then put our horses in a bit and bridle which can press against sharp teeth, sometimes causing cheek and tongue lacerations, and ulceration. To work on the bit in an outline, the horse must allow the lower jaw to move forward. Overgrown teeth will restrict this movement of the lower jaw, causing pain and resentment.

## Tools for tooth care

The following equipment may be used by your veterinary surgeon for oral examination and routine equine dentistry...

- Full mouth speculum (gag)
- Dental head torch or light
- Dental mirror
- Dental picks and probes
- Full set of rasps (floats)
- Power instruments
- Head stand
- A variety of sedatives and local anaesthetics

## Routine rasping

A thorough oral examination will be carried out by your vet. This will involve the use of a gag (or speculum) to open the horse's mouth and a light. Some sedation may be given to allow a more thorough assessment and more effective rasping.

Once dental overgrowths and sharp edges have been identified on your horse's teeth, these will be rasped (floated). This will leave these edges smooth and prevent further pain or trauma (see below). This may be carried out using hand tools (rasps), power tools or a combination of both.



Sharp edge prior to rasping



Smoothed off after rasping

## Next month

Discover more about advanced dental procedures.

## Signs of problems

Even in horses with moderately severe mouth lacerations and dental disease, the desire to eat will be maintained and the problems may not be obvious without a full dental examination. Signs of dental problems include...

- dropping food (quidding).
- weight loss.
- bad odour.
- biting problems or evasion.
- head tilt or shaking.
- facial swelling/nasal discharge.
- colic or choke.

## Time for a check-up?

### FROM BIRTH TO 18 MONTHS

At this age, your vet will need to check for alignment. Deciduous (baby) teeth can get sharp enamel points, too.

### 18 MONTHS TO FOUR YEARS

During this time, all deciduous teeth (caps) are lost and 36 to 44 permanent teeth erupt. Routine dental care every six to 12 months is essential during this time. Before putting a bit in, your horse's teeth must be examined and any wolf teeth assessed for potential interference.

### FOUR TO 18 YEARS

Regular checks should be arranged every six to 12 months.

### OVER 18 YEARS

Regular checks must be carried out as the teeth wear down. Dental disease is common in the older horse.

We recommend your horse's mouth is examined at least once a year, perhaps as part of his annual vaccination and check-up. The interval for inspection and treatment will vary between individuals and the problem presented, but regular care will keep him comfortable and healthy in his mouth, which is essential for his health and well-being.

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