

NEW
HEALTH
SERIES

PART 3

Avoid dental disasters

In the third of our series, exploring key equine health issues, discover the biggest threats to your horse's teeth and how to keep them in order with expert advice from equine dental technician **Penny Brownings**

With the help of an equine dental technician you can keep your horse's teeth in good shape

YOUR HORSE'S TEETH are vital to his well-being - look after them and you can help to keep him healthy well into old age. However, fail to keep

them in good condition and your horse will be at increased risk of mouth ulcers, lacerations, pain and even conditions such as choke, colic and weight loss. Fortunately, with the help of a qualified equine dental technician (EDT) there's plenty you can do to keep your horse's gnashers in tip-top condition.

When it comes to checking your horse for a dental problem, EDT Penny Brownings explains that while there's little you can check by feel, changes in your horse's behaviour can be early warning signs. "Yawning, face rubbing and head shaking when eating can all indicate a problem," she explains, in addition to favouring one side when eating. "Horses grind their food in a circular motion in the same continuous

MEET THE EXPERT



PENNY BROWINGS RVN, member of BAEDT, is the only qualified vet nurse in the UK to have qualified as an equine dental technician. She works for Cliffe Equine Clinic (part of the XL Equine group). Find out more at www.cliffeequine.co.uk

TIME FOR A CHECK UP?

All horses should have their teeth checked by a qualified equine dental technician (EDT) at least once a year. Visit www.baedt.com to find your nearest qualified EDT



The pressure of a flash on sharp edges in the mouth could affect your horse's behaviour under saddle



pattern. They'll usually go round approximately a dozen times on one side, have a rest or swallow, then go round the other way. If your horse appears to be preferring one side over the other, this can suggest there's something wrong." The only way to spot this type of behaviour is to know your horse, so Penny recommends taking some time getting to know your horse's grinding pattern by watching him eat. Once you're familiar with his habits it will be far easier to spot when something's wrong. "Changes in behaviour when ridden, such as resistance when taking a contact, head tilting, head shaking and opening the mouth, can all be signs of dental or oral discomfort," says Penny, who explains that the pressure of the head gear pressing down over any underlying sharp points on the teeth will cause pain and a reaction. "A classic assumption made by horse owners is that resistance to a flash, for example, is due to naughtiness. But my advice would be to remove the flash and see if the horse stops resisting when it's no

longer on. Quite often sharp enamel points in the mouth are the cause of this type of behaviour." Other things to look out for include:

- Dropping hard feed
- Quidding hay - when a horse drops balls of hay after chewing
- Dunking hay in water when eating
- Slow eating
- Poor digestion
- Choke
- Impacted colic

THE DAMAGE OF DOMESTICATION

The further from nature our horses become the more dental problems they're likely to experience. "In the wild a horse would graze 365 days a year and for approximately 16 hours each day," says Penny. "Now they spend more time in the stable and less time grazing, all of which impacts on their teeth." So be aware - the more 'managed' your horse is, i.e. the more he's stabled and fed a high-sugar diet and fermented long fibre, the greater the risk to his dental health.



PAIN PATROL
Facing your horse, gently place your hands against the sides of his face and press down over his cheek teeth. A reaction could indicate pain from sharp teeth.

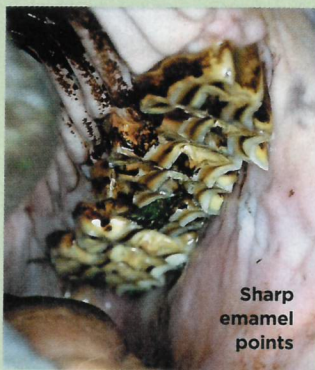
Common problems

There can be all sorts going on in your horse's mouth. Here, we give you the lowdown on common problems and how you'll hear your EDT refer to them:

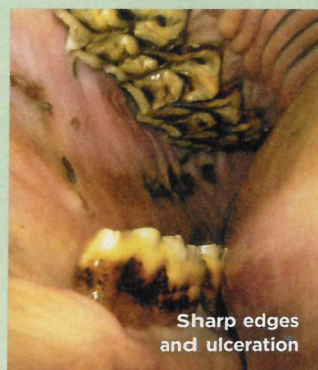
SHARP ENAMEL POINTS

A horse's teeth erupt at a rate of approximately 2-3mm each year. As they do, the tooth surface is gradually worn down as a result of the way the horse grinds his food. His upper jaw is wider than his lower jaw and, because of the way he chews (in a sideways, circular motion) the enamel of his teeth on the outside of the upper cheek teeth and inside of the lower teeth can become sharp if not naturally worn down.

"Sharp edges are like sharks' teeth and can cause quite profound soreness, lacerations and ulceration to the cheeks and tongue," says Penny. "The pain from these sharp edges can cause breaks in concentration when we ask our horses to do something, and may lead to head tossing, bolting or other behaviours we too often label as naughtiness."



Sharp enamel points



Sharp edges and ulceration



An incisor cap emerging

CAPS (deciduous teeth)

The deciduous, or baby, teeth are naturally shed as the permanent teeth erupt through from the gum line. This process begins at the age of two and is complete when all permanent teeth are in wear by the age of five. Failure to shed caps properly can cause soft tissue trauma and ulceration and the prevention of normal tooth eruption can cause displacement of the permanent tooth.

HOOKS

This is a common abnormality that usually occurs due to abnormal wear, often as a result of misalignment of the upper and lower jaw. When misalignment occurs, areas of the tooth don't wear down as they should, instead forming a 'hook'. Hooks are typically found on the first premolar and also the corner upper incisors.



Hooks are a common issue



Parrot mouth

PARROT MOUTH

A hereditary condition, parrot mouth is when the horse's upper jaw is longer than the lower jaw. Because of this misalignment there's no contact between the upper and lower incisors, first premolars or last molars. It's therefore critical that horses with parrot mouth are treated by an EDT or vet every six months to reduce the height of overgrown teeth.

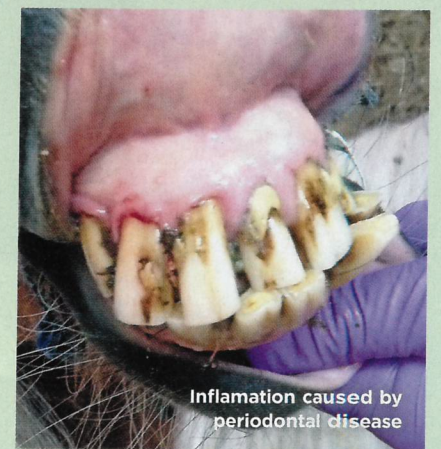
PHOTO: BOB LANGRISH

RAMPS

These can be found on the first upper and lower premolars, and the last upper and lower molars. Unlike a hook, a ramp can take up a larger portion of the tooth and occur due to abnormal wear. These normally happen due to the misalignment of the upper and lower molars.



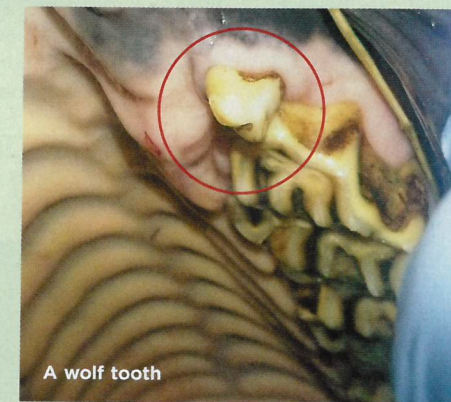
A ramp



Inflammation caused by periodontal disease

PERIODONTAL DISEASE

This begins when bacteria in the horse's mouth multiply around the teeth and gums causing inflammation and discomfort. Factors such as food becoming trapped between or around the teeth and the formation of plaque are both potential causes. The earliest stage of the disease is gingivitis. Periodontal disease can be visible to owners when it affects the incisors. Its effects can be reduced by regularly removing food and debris that's become trapped between your horse's incisors. A soft toothbrush can help to make short work of this quick, daily task, as can flushing the mouth with clean water from a hose or large syringe.



A wolf tooth

WOLF TEETH

These are most commonly found in front of the upper molars, but it's not unheard of for wolf teeth to be found on the lower jaw. Owners will often be advised to have them removed at an early age to prevent irritation and interference with the bit.

Working together to build a **Picture of Health**



Ageing Dental Care

Parasite Control

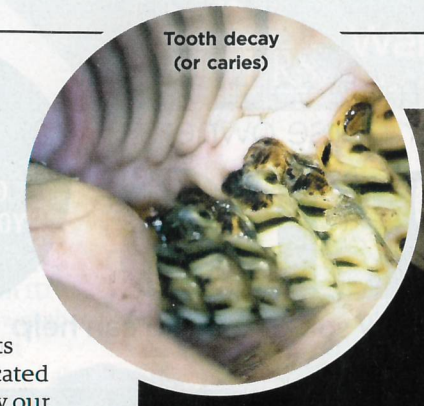
Vaccination

XLEquine veterinary practices believe that prevention is better than cure. Talk to your local XLEquine veterinary surgeon about preventative healthcare so together we can ensure your horse is a complete **Picture of Health**.

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Tooth decay (or caries)

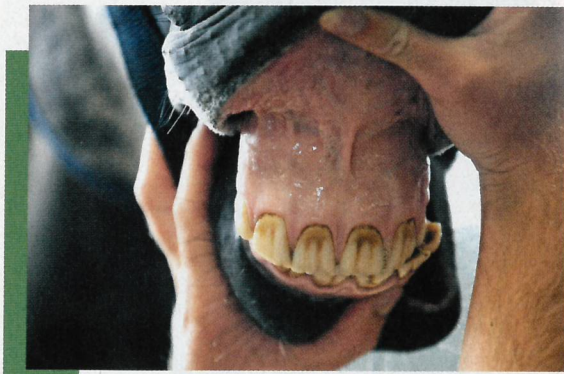
The sugar crisis

In the UK tooth decay (caries) in equines is a growing problem and, as Penny explains, we as horse owners really need to start thinking about our horse's teeth in the same way we might our children's or our own. "High sugar levels in hard feed and treats are a big problem for our domesticated horses this is worsened by the way our horses are kept," she says. "If a horse is fed something that's high in sugar, be it feed or a treat, and then stabled, or travelled where he might not have access to water for a period of time, the pH level in the mouth will be affected." Grazing helps to neutralise the pH level in the horse's mouth. Currently there are studies being carried out on the effects of pH change on differing dental tissues.

"It's common to see improvements in the dental health of horses that have time off on paddock rest due to injury, while others' teeth may become worse when they're on long-term box rest" says Penny. "Out in the field they exist as nature intended, grazing and foraging for many hours, all of which helps to maintain good dental health."



Feeding hard feed with high sugar levels can put our horses at risk of tooth decay



DENTAL CHECKS

During a routine check you can expect your EDT to:

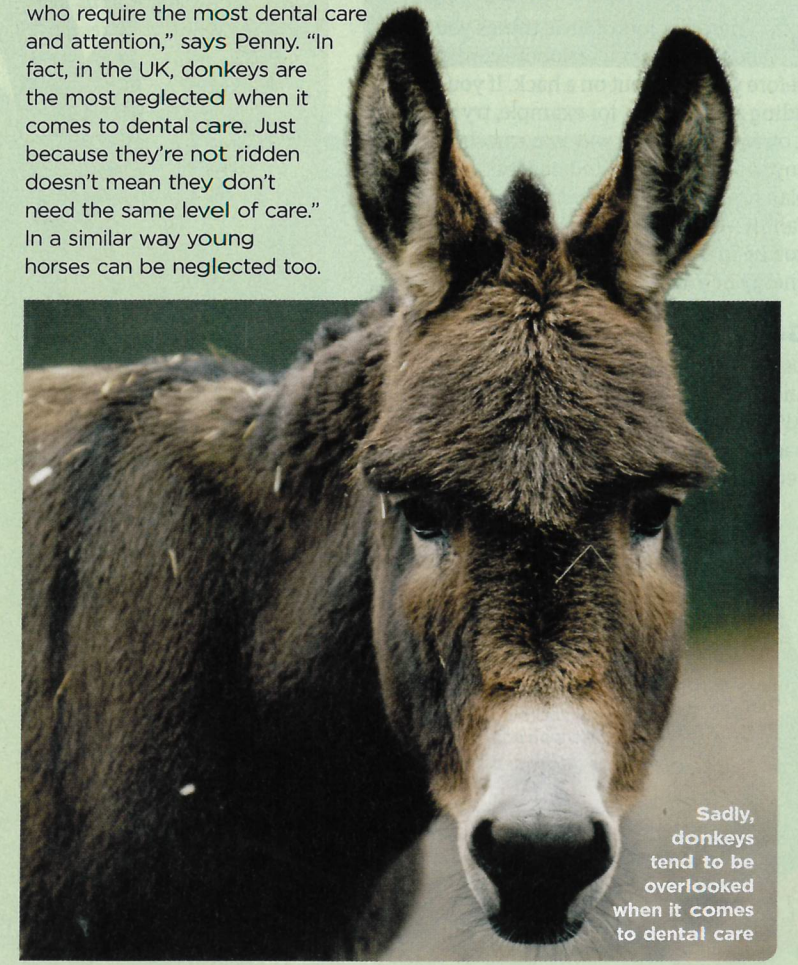
- Take a complete medical history
- Carefully examine your horse's head and mouth using a head torch and a mirror
- Examine the mouth for sores, ulcers and other lesions
- Check for fractures, displacements, periodontal disease, impacted food (diastemata), decay and any surface defects
- Check for symmetry and wear
- Check normal eruption of teeth for your horse's age
- Perform a treatment
- Leave a clear follow-up plan
- Document any findings on a dental chart

NEXT MONTH
This series is run in support of XLEquine's Picture of Health Campaign. Next month we explore the latest vet advances in foot care.
● Find out more at www.xlequine.co.uk

Did you know?

Small, big eared, young and old equines are the ones most often neglected when it comes to dental care. "Miniature breeds, donkeys, young and old horses are the ones who require the most dental care and attention," says Penny. "In fact, in the UK, donkeys are the most neglected when it comes to dental care. Just because they're not ridden doesn't mean they don't need the same level of care." In a similar way young horses can be neglected too.

"People tend to assume that young horses don't need checking until they're in work." In reality they can be checked as young as a yearling, but routinely from two years of age to remove sharp edges and identify future problems. 🐾



Sadly, donkeys tend to be overlooked when it comes to dental care