

Equine Dentistry : The Hidden Issue

We tend to overlook the importance of the horse's mouth because it is just so difficult to see inside or have any appreciation of the importance of the teeth and eating process.

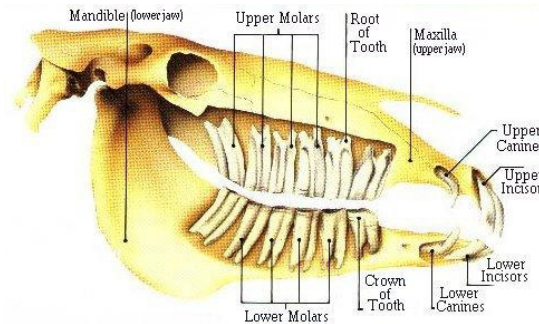
Horses evolved as prey animals, their defence is to run far and fast, the digestive system over time has developed to ensure maximum utilisation of food whilst keeping the horse's digestive system as lightweight and streamlined as possible, hence they do not digest food slowly like other animals such as the cow. In some ways the equine system is very inefficient in comparison, but evolution has made it this way for a purpose, flight is a basic requirement of the horse.

The initial processing of food begins in the mouth (mastication). Issues in the mouth that reduce the efficiency of food processing can and do begin to affect the total overall health of the animal.



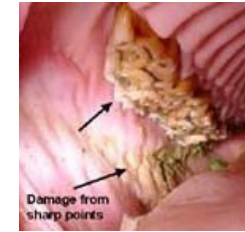
Horse's Teeth

- **12 incisors**
- **2-4 canine teeth**
- **0-4 wolf teeth (a remnant of evolution that have no purpose and cause biting problems)**
- **24 molars**



Horses are hypsodont animals, which means their teeth initially are a set length and erupt throughout their lives, they don't grow like a rabbit or rats. During the process of eating the tooth is worn down at a rate similar to the eruption rate, approximately 2-3mm per year.

The wearing process creates sharp edges which can rub and pierce the inside of the mouth. Also any minor imbalances in the mouth, which most horses will have, interrupt the correct wear pattern leading to the formation of ramps, hooks and other abnormalities, thus reducing the ability of the horse to process food and perform as we expect them to.



Sharp rims damaging inner cheek tissue

*hook
oped over time
an imbalance
mouth*



A common misconception that "wild horses don't have their teeth filed therefore mine don't need to" can be expelled if we simply think a little harder. Wild horses are expected to live until their early teens, but now due to advances in worming, hoof care and dentistry it is not that uncommon for our horses to live well into their late 30's. We also expect our equine friends to accept bits and perform various sometime complex tasks for us. A very different scenario from roaming the countryside with the sole purpose of finding enough food and avoiding predators in order to survive and reproduce.

Most dentists will now set the horse up for a bit by rounding the front of the first four molars creating what we call a bitseat. This improves the comfort level your horse will experience when bitted to ensure maximum cooperation and harmony when asked to perform.

Life Stages and dental care requirements



The Young Horse

The first examination: Often no treatment will be required prior to 2 and a half years of age but the horse should be checked for conditions, such as parrot mouth, which can be treated more effectively early.

Prior to biting: wolf teeth should be removed before a bit is introduced

At 2½ horses begin to lose caps (baby teeth) at this age. The next year is a very busy time in a horse's mouth, the horse should be checked every 4 months until approximately 3½, and once more at 4½ to check and remove any premolar and incisor caps that may be retained.



The Mature Horse

By 5 years old the horse is considered mature, all baby teeth have been shed and in most cases regular maintenance is the order of the day. Rims floated, tables balanced and bitseats maintained on a yearly schedule.



Geriatric

At approximately 18 years old the first of the molars will begin to wear down to a point where they cannot erupt much further. At this stage of life yearly maintenance is still a must but any signs of a decrease in health or problems eating need to be taken very seriously. Dental disease, the need for extractions and other serious conditions can quickly affect the horse's general health and quality of life. If in doubt, call your dentist sooner rather than later.

Common signs that your horse needs dental treatment

- Difficulty with biting
- Pulling to one side
- Headflicking or shaking
- Headshyness
- Sudden changes in behaviour
- Packing food, swelling on either side of the checks
- Dropping feed
- Sudden weight loss or gain
- Dull appearance or demeanour
- Unilateral discharge from nostrils
- Discharge from abscess draining from lower jaw
- Sweet unpleasant smell coming from the mouth or nose
- And many more



R A Bush Equine Dentistry

Rebecca Bush BSc, EqDT, IAED member

Ph 09 2386799 Mob 021 2403666

73 Pook Rd, RD2, Pukekohe



EQUINE DENTISTRY

The Basic Facts



Many of us have heard the saying

"no foot no horse"

The same can be said of the horse's mouth