

Fact Sheet

Equine Dental Care

Why is it important for your horse to have regular dental check ups

In the wild, a horse may graze for up to 18 hours a day. As herbivores they rely on the grinding mechanism of their teeth to break down their feed in order to obtain adequate nourishment.

When horses chew their food, they move their jaw in a repetitive cyclical motion. The amount of time spent chewing and the range of movement in the jaw is significantly greater when eating a coarse high fibre diet, as compared to a softer more carbohydrate rich diet.

The modern domesticated horse doesn't need to work quite as hard as their wild counterpart for their calories. They generally have access to much more plentiful grazing and grass types which are softer and lusher, and therefore more easy to break down and digest.

Unfortunately, this means there is more potential for the development of dental wear abnormalities over time. This is why regular examination and preventative treatment is essential in domestic horses.



What are the signs of a dental problem?

Clinical signs of dental disease are variable and there may be no outward signs at all. The lack of clinical signs can therefore not be relied upon to make the assumption that all is well.

Some of the more obvious indicators of dental disease include:

- Difficulty eating
- Issues when ridden
- Quidding (dropping chewed up balls of feed)
- Halitosis (bad breath)
- Behavioural changes
- Biting problems
- Facial swelling
- Weight loss
- One-sided nasal discharge



Who should examine my horse's mouth?

Dentistry should only ever be carried out by a vet or a qualified Equine Dental Technician (EDT). The dental exam should not be simply thought of as a 'tooth rasp' - it is an examination first and foremost. Compare this with your own visits to the dentist.

Veterinary surgeons will always thoroughly examine your horse's mouth. This will most commonly be done under sedation, meaning that subtle pathology will be identified at an early stage and appropriate treatment can then be given.

Who is permitted to carry out specific dental procedures is regulated by law. Veterinary surgeons are qualified to deal with the full range of problems which they may encounter within your horse's mouth. They are also able to take a holistic view of the patient and put any findings into context with the animal as a whole. Only veterinary surgeons can legally administer intravenous sedation.

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How often should my horse receive a dental examination?

Your horse's teeth should be examined by your vet every 6-12 months unless advised otherwise. It's important to identify problems early. Prevention is always better than cure and as such owners are encouraged to have their horse's mouths examined on a regular basis.

Power instruments

In recent years the use of power instruments for equine dentistry has become commonplace.

The use of a mechanical rasp with a motor and rotating disc burr in place of traditional hand rasps allows the operator a greater degree of accuracy and the ability to deal with overgrowths much more effectively.

These instruments do not replace the need for a high level of expertise and can cause harm in the wrong hands.

Legally, they must only be used by suitably trained and qualified persons.



The oral examination

- A thorough dental examination begins with the taking of the horse's history and an evaluation of the horse as a whole
- Your vet will then examine the horse's head externally for any outward signs of dental disease such as swelling, enlarged lymph nodes or nasal discharge
- The lips and incisors (front teeth) will be examined also
- When it is time to examine the oral cavity, your vet will place a gag in the horse's mouth which holds the jaws apart in order that a thorough examination may be carried out safely
- The oral cavity is flushed with clean water to remove food material which is invariably present within the mouth
- All of the dental and soft tissue structures within the mouth can then be examined
- A bright light source (usually a headtorch) and a mirror are required to examine all aspects of the mouth adequately
- Once this has been done, findings can be recorded and an appropriate treatment carried out
- This almost invariably involves the removal of sharp enamel points using a motorised dental rasp

Thorough and regular examination is key to maintaining dental health.

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This factsheet was created by the VetPartners Equine Team, with assistance from our Marketing Team and Veterinary Regulatory Advisors.

For further information, please contact your local VetPartners Equine Veterinary Practice on:

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Together with our practices, our focus is on providing an excellent service to our equine clients.

No two practices are the same, and we understand and embrace that independent spirit.