



FACT SHEET

CARING FOR YOUR HORSE'S MOUTH

During Pet Dental Health month the Australian Veterinary Association is reminding horse owners to make sure they follow through on dental check-ups for their horses.

The following document has been produced to assist horse owners to learn more about good equine health and dental practices. With accurate knowledge about dental care and its importance for the overall health of the horse, horse owners can work in conjunction with their equine veterinarian to ensure their horse receives the very best dental treatment to remain in optimum health.



Why is it important for my horse to have regular dental examinations?

An oral examination is an essential part of your horse's physical examination performed by a veterinarian. Dental and oral problems are not uncommon in horses and many of these conditions lead to chronic pain in the horse. This 'check-up' provides the opportunity to properly examine the mouth and teeth and if necessary perform preventative dental maintenance. As horses have teeth that are continually erupting, small problems can lead to big problems in a short period. Remember prevention is always better than cure.

How often should I get my horse's teeth checked?

At a minimum, you should get your horse's teeth checked once a year. From birth to six years of age, horses should be ideally seen twice a year. Senior horses (20 years of age or older) are at increased risk of developing periodontal disease so twice-a-year check-ups are often necessary to keep their teeth functioning properly into their thirties and forties.

How will I know if my horse has a dental problem?

In most cases you won't know until it is too late as horses are reluctant to show signs of pain or weakness. Some signs you may observe include spilling of feed, biting problems, difficulty eating and eating faster or slower than normal. Remember this is not an exhaustive list of signs, just a few of the common ones. A thorough Veterinary dental examination is the best way of checking your horse's dental health.

How many teeth does a horse have?

As mares are less likely to have canine (bridle) teeth and horses can have between 0 and 4 wolf teeth, they typically have 36 to 44 teeth, while a typical adult male horse has 40 to 44 permanent teeth. A horse's permanent teeth cheek teeth are about 12cm long.

Will my horse need to be sedated during a dental check?

Some horses find the process of having their mouth opened and instruments placed inside it to be quite strange. Animals not used to what occurs during an examination and treatment may be reluctant to stand still. Remember also, some dental conditions can be extremely painful. For a complete oral examination and good quality corrective care, horses need to be sedated to reduce movement as well as providing analgesia (pain relief) during treatment. An unsedated horse is dangerous to itself and to those providing its care.

Do horses have 'baby' teeth?

Like humans, horses have two sets of teeth in their lifetime. The baby teeth, called deciduous teeth, are temporary. An easy way to remember when their deciduous incisors should erupt is – six days, six weeks and six months. 'Baby' incisor teeth will begin to be replaced by adult teeth around the age of two and a half and by age five, most horses will have all of their permanent teeth.

What are wolf teeth and are they a problem for my horse?

Wolf teeth, so called because they look like canine teeth in dogs, are the vestigial teeth that have become nonessential as horses have evolved. They most commonly appear in the upper jaw behind where the bit fits. If present, wolf teeth are often sharp and may cause the horse some discomfort when pressure is placed on the bit and lips. Therefore, these teeth are usually removed in young riding horses and should only be done using nerve blocks to prevent pain.

Why is it important for an equine veterinarian to perform dental work on my horse?

Only an equine trained veterinarian has the medical knowledge to understand and treat dental conditions which may affect the horse's overall health. Most equine dental procedures can irreversibly change the horse's teeth and therefore are most appropriately performed by a veterinarian. The Australian Veterinary Association, along with the Australian Veterinary Dental Society, believes dentistry is an important branch of veterinary medicine which should only be performed by a licensed veterinarian.

How do diet, pasture management and stabling impact dental wear?

Horses in the wild normally spend 16 hours a day with their heads down, grazing on grass, using a crushing, chewing pattern. This allows the incisor teeth and cheek teeth to wear at a normal and even rate. Many horses are fed an abnormal diet (grain and hay) for shorter intervals during the day, with an abnormal head posture (feed tub or hay rack). All of these conditions alter the chewing pattern and adversely affect the way teeth are worn over time.

Do donkeys and mules require different dental care to horses?

All equine species have the same type dentition. We see the same types of pathology and wear patterns in donkeys, mules, zebras and horses. Under current domestication practices, all require regular dental care.

