

source to be able to visualize and diagnose any problems. The final step is to record all findings so that they can be reviewed at a later time.

## Routine Dental Care

The most common procedure your veterinarian will perform is typically called floating the teeth. This borrows a word from farriery which basically means to rasp or file. Dental floats can be either muscle powered, electric, or air-powered. Care is taken to only remove sharp or abnormal surfaces and to preserve the roughness of the chewing surfaces to allow proper processing of the feed. Another common procedure is extraction of wolf teeth or retained deciduous teeth. Extraction of teeth is a surgical procedure which requires extra knowledge to perform. Poor surgical technique could lead to severe problems (i.e. excessive bleeding, fractures, etc.) and even death. Your veterinarian is well-trained in surgical techniques and how to manage any related medical problems.

Advanced equine dentistry may include procedures such as extraction of diseased cheek teeth, endodontics to preserve teeth which have been cracked or had the pulp chamber exposed, and dental equilibration to correct imbalances between incisors and cheek teeth. An extensive knowledge of dental anatomy, physiology, and function is necessary to provide these advanced procedures. Many common human dental procedures are beginning to be applied to equine dentistry to further advance the level of health care for the horse.

While not every veterinarian is comfortable providing more advanced dental care, he or she, as the provider of your horse's health, can refer you to another veterinarian who has placed a special emphasis and has extensive

training on this aspect of veterinary medicine. Equine dentistry is much more than just rubbing a rasp over a horse's teeth, it requires a thorough examination to detect any problems and then the knowledge to correct or minimize those problems. Equine dental care is just part of the overall preventative health maintenance program of your horse provided by your veterinarian. Other parts of this program includes annual examinations, immunizations, parasite control and nutrition counseling.

For the health of your horse, contact your veterinarian for more information on dental care that can make their life healthier and happier.

For additional information on equine dental care, go to:  
"Pet Care and Livestock Resources"  
at [www.mvma.us](http://www.mvma.us)



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# The Facts About Equine Dentistry



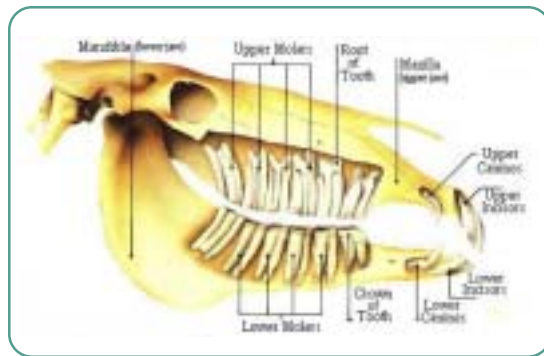
**Another Service  
Provided By Your  
MVMA Member Veterinarian**

## Why Horses Need Dental Care

Horses are unique among the domestic animals in that they have a relatively long life span and have teeth that erupt throughout their lifetime. This allows horses to have a continually renewed grinding surface with which to process their feed. However, this can create some special challenges in maintaining the health of the horse. Abnormalities in the eruption of the permanent teeth, the loss of baby (deciduous) teeth, or the subsequent wear of the teeth can result in problems ranging from mild discomfort to painful chewing difficulties and even to death in severe cases. Your veterinarian, with the aid of a thorough oral exam, can determine the presence and extent of any problems and can decide on a plan of action for correcting or minimizing the problems.

## Dental Anatomy and Function

Foals are usually born with up to 16 teeth. By the time they are nine months old, their mouth may contain as many as 24 deciduous teeth. Shortly thereafter they will begin to erupt permanent teeth and to lose some of their deciduous teeth. By the time they are five years of age all of their deciduous teeth should be gone and all of their permanent teeth should be present. An adult horse typically has from 36 to 44 permanent teeth. The teeth can be divided by type into 12 incisors, up to four canine teeth, up to four wolf teeth, and 24 cheek teeth. Mares typically have fewer teeth than stallions or geldings.



Courtesy: HorseQuest Magazine

The incisor teeth function to bite grass off when grazing. The canine teeth and wolf teeth do not have a digestive function but the canine teeth may be used for fighting. The 24 cheek teeth, six in each arcade are packed together to form a chewing unit. They serve as large grinding surfaces to break up feed materials into smaller pieces before they go down into the stomach. The mouth must be balanced from front to back to allow the incisors and cheek teeth to work independently of each other. The cheek teeth surfaces angle upwards from the cheek toward the tongue and are roughened on the chewing surfaces. Many horses develop sharp places or points on the inside of the lower cheek teeth and the outside of the upper cheek teeth due to this angulation and the failure to completely grind side-to-side for even wear.

## The Examination

A horse should have his mouth examined by your veterinarian as part of an annual physical exam. Younger horses (less than five year of age) should be examined twice per year due to the eruption and loss of teeth during this time to detect problems earlier. Older horses or horses with specifically diagnosed problems may also need to be examined more frequently to determine if problems exist that need to be corrected.

Common problems include sharp enamel points on the inside lower cheek teeth and the outside upper cheek teeth, abnormal eruption of teeth, failure of deciduous teeth to be shed, surface wear abnormalities of cheek teeth, missing teeth and periodontal disease. A thorough examination will be necessary to fully detect all of these problems.

## Indications of Dental Problems

- Loss of body condition
- Losing feed or saliva from mouth when eating
- Long fiber length in manure
- Poor performance, i.e. bit problems
- Malodorous breath
- Abnormal head postures, i.e. tilting head when eating
- Resisting bridling or the lolling the bit in the mouth
- Abnormal facial swellings

What constitutes a thorough examination? Typically a horse will have to be sedated to facilitate the exam. Although sedatives are generally safe, your veterinarian has the expert knowledge in pharmacology and medicine to be prepared in case of an adverse reaction. Only veterinarians can legally prescribe sedatives to a client's animals in the state of Missouri. Other necessary components of the oral exam include a full-mouth speculum to safely hold their mouth open and a bright light