

Your Horse's Teeth

By Jen Reid

A horse's teeth are often an overlooked area. But, proper dental care can have a huge impact on your horse's health. If a horse is getting lots of feed but is having trouble maintaining her weight, there's a good chance her teeth may be the reason.



Horses' teeth grow throughout their lives. They have a set of teeth in the front of their mouths that are used to bite off grass, a space about three inches long with no teeth, and then molars clear to the back of their mouths. They move their jaws side to side (rather than up and down, like we do) to grind the feed up with their molars. This grinding motion continually wears down their molars and some of the edges along where the cheeks or tongue are located can get very sharp in places (called points or hooks). Hooks and points can cut the soft tissue in the mouth, making it painful to chew.

Pain in the mouth can even lead to lameness problems. A horse whose mouth hurts will sometimes clench his jaws, which tightens up the muscles in the neck and shoulders, with the result that the horse can't walk out with his front legs like he should.

Floating teeth. To care for a horse's teeth, a vet will mildly sedate the horse and insert a speculum into her mouth to keep it open. Then, tools called floats are used to file down the sharp areas and any other abnormalities that she may have. If a tooth is abscessed, it may have to be pulled. The average horse should have a visit from the dentist every year.

The older horse. As horses age, the quality (and sometimes quantity) of teeth can diminish to the point where even floating them can't help. You may start to notice wads of hay on the ground around the feeding areas, indicating that the horse chews the hay for a while but can't get it broken down enough to swallow. This inevitably leads to her dropping weight. A good step to take at this stage is to switch her to either hay pellets or cubes that have been soaked in enough water to make them into a soft, prechewed mush. The pellets or cubes can be used as either a supplement to the normal pasture or hay, or as the sole source of forage.

So, just as with humans, teeth can make all the difference in the health and happiness of a horse. And while they may enjoy a visit from the dentist about as much as we do, they'll thank you in the end!

Jen Reid is a professional farrier who graduated from Mission Farrier School in Redmond, Washington. She has worked at Best Friends' Horse Haven for five years, apprenticing under Ann Hepworth, the resident horse trainer.