

Dental Care for Horses

Horse Dental Care: Keeping Your Equine Friend's Smile Healthy

When it comes to our beloved horses, regular dental care is crucial. Did you know horses are pretty good at hiding dental pain? That's why having a professional check their teeth every six to twelve months is an essential part of keeping your horse healthy and happy.



Why Is Regular Dental Care So Important?

Just like us, horses' teeth change over time. As they munch on rough fibre, their teeth naturally wear down about 2 to 3 millimetres each year. This wear isn't always even, and it can lead to some painful dental issues. Since horses are adept at masking their discomfort, many dental problems can go unnoticed until your horse starts showing signs of distress or changes in behaviour.

That's where routine dental checks come in. By having a qualified equine dental technician examine your horse's teeth, you can catch any potential issues early and keep those pearly whites and gums in tip-top shape throughout their life.

What Signs Should You Look Out For?

It can be tough to spot dental problems in horses because they often don't show symptoms until the issue has progressed. However, here are some signs that could indicate your horse is having dental trouble:

- A lack of appetite or hesitation to eat
- Drooling or excessive saliva
- Discharge from the mouth or nose

- Sores, swelling, or pain around the mouth, throat, or jawline
- Behavioural changes, whether on a day-to-day basis or while riding
- Bad breath that's more than just "horse smell"
- Losing weight or condition
- Spilling food from their mouth or dropping partially chewed hay (a behaviour called quidding)
- Chewing more slowly than usual or favouring one side of their mouth
- Shaking their head
- Showing reluctance or aggression toward the bridle when being ridden

If you notice any changes in your horse's behaviour, especially when riding, it's a good idea to have their teeth checked. Often, issues that seem to stem from the bridle or bit may actually be due to underlying dental problems.



The Importance of Professional Dental Checks

It's generally recommended to schedule dental checks with a qualified equine veterinary surgeon or dental technician every six to twelve months. This helps catch any undetected issues early, even if your horse doesn't appear to have any dental problems at the moment.

Regular check-ups are vital because they:

- Ensure your horse is pain-free
- Help your horse eat and chew properly, which keeps their digestive system healthy
- Prevent major dental issues, potentially saving you on costs in the long run

- Help maintain dental health as your horse ages

While horses don't have a full set of permanent teeth until they're around five years old, it's wise to start familiarising them with dental checks early on. This will help them feel more comfortable during routine inspections and catch any issues while they're still young and transitioning from baby teeth.

Choosing the Right Equine Dental Technician



When it comes to dental care, not all equine dentists are created equal. Surprisingly, some practitioners don't need formal qualifications to work on your horse's teeth, which could lead to serious long-term issues. So, how do you find a reliable technician?

Make sure your chosen technician is registered with the British Association of Equine Dental Technicians (BAEDT). Those registered with BAEDT have:

- Passed a DEFRA-approved exam
- Committed to a code of conduct
- Insurance coverage

You can check their website for a list of registered technicians to find someone qualified.

What Happens During a Dental Check?

When you take your horse in for a dental appointment, here's what to expect:

1. Examination of Your Horse's Head:

The dental technician will start by looking for signs of dental issues, such as swelling in the face or any nasal discharge. They'll also ask about any changes in your horse's behaviour or health.

2. Thorough Dental Inspection:

Next, the technician will rinse your horse's mouth and use a device called a speculum (or gag) to keep it open. With a bright head torch, they'll inspect your horse's mouth for sharp edges, overgrown teeth, ulcers, gum disease, or other abnormalities. If your horse is in pain or resistant to having their teeth examined, they may need sedation, so don't hesitate to talk to your vet if you're concerned.

3. Treatment:

If the technician finds any issues, they'll discuss treatment options with you. Treatment can be performed by hand or with motorised tools, and a final check will follow once the treatment is completed.

4. Dental Chart:

After the appointment, your horse will receive a dental chart detailing any findings and the treatment provided. This chart helps you keep track of your horse's dental health over time.



Common Dental Problems in Horses

Horses can face various dental issues, including:

- **Disorders of Wear:**

Horses' teeth grow throughout their lives but wear down unevenly from grazing. This can lead to sharp edges that hurt their cheeks and tongue, or hooks at the back of their mouths that interfere with normal chewing. Regular checks can catch these issues early before they become severe.

- **Gum Disease:**

Periodontal disease occurs when the tissue around the teeth becomes inflamed or infected, often from food getting stuck between the teeth. If caught early, severe treatments like tooth extraction can be avoided.

- **Tooth Decay (Caries):**

Just like us, horses can suffer from tooth decay over time. If discovered early during a dental check, fillings can prevent further damage. However, if decay becomes severe, it could lead to fractured teeth that may need removal.

- **Wolf Teeth:**

These are vestigial teeth that can grow in horses between 18 months and three years old. While not all horses will have them, those that do may experience pain when a bit or bridle is applied, causing them to toss their heads or resist the bridle.



- **Older Horses:**

Regular checks become even more critical for older horses, as they are more likely to lose teeth or face other dental issues that make chewing and grazing difficult. This can lead to weight loss and nutritional deficiencies, increasing the risk of colic or choking. If your older horse is having trouble eating, soaking their forage can make it easier for them to chew.

In summary, keeping your horse's dental health in check is essential for their overall well-being. With regular dental appointments and the right care, you can help ensure your horse stays happy, healthy, and pain-free throughout their life!