

HOW OFTEN SHOULD MY HORSE SEE *the dentist?*

By Lu Ann Groves, DVM

The general rule is that a horse's teeth should be floated every year. But this may not always apply — your individual horse, as well as the dentist, are big factors in how often his teeth need to be done.

How often should you get your horse's teeth floated? The standard answer is once a year. But there are several things to take into consideration. The most important factor is who you get to float his teeth. This is a very important choice and can have an impact on not only your horse's teeth, but also on how long he will live. If you have someone working on his mouth who is not specifically trained to float teeth, the result could have negative health effects for your horse.

DENTISTRY NEEDS IN THE OLDER HORSE

If you over-float an older horse's teeth, you can loosen them and they will fall out sooner. When a horse is young, the roots of his teeth are very long. As he ages, he wears his teeth down, and more of the roots erupt into the mouth. By the time the horse is 20 years old, most of the tooth has erupted and there is very little root left to anchor it to the gums. If the dentist you choose to work

on your horse's mouth is too aggressive, the dental floats will loosen the teeth. When the teeth fall out, it makes it difficult for the horse to chew his food, thus shortening his life. Because of this, a horse over the age of 20 may only need his teeth floated every two or three years.

It is important to have an equine dentist check your older horse's mouth every year for loose teeth, which can get an infection underneath them if left in



the mouth. The dentist will also check for sharp points that can cut into your horse's gums; pockets of skin that can get infected; and teeth that get long because the opposing tooth is missing. A good equine dentist will not float your horse's teeth if they do not need it. Many older horses suffer from over-floating, just like over-vaccinating. I once had an older horse come into my clinic with a bloody mouth, and upon further inspection the veterinarian had floated the gums of the horse and caused a lot of bleeding. The horse had nothing left but the very ends of his teeth, right up to his gums. His teeth had already fully erupted — there was nothing left to float.

A good equine dentist will have a full mouth speculum, a good light to see into the horse's mouth, and many different types of floats to reach into different parts of the mouth. If the above horse's mouth had been examined with a full mouth speculum and a good light, the poor animal would not have had his gums floated. Be sure and ask to feel in your horse's mouth both before and after he is floated. If the dentist refuses, take your horse to someone else. You are feeling for sharp edges on the

outside of the upper molars in his top jaw and the inside of the lower molars in his lower jaw. Sometimes there is a really long point in the very back and the very front of your horse's mouth, and both need to be reduced. Some dentists are not sure how to work in the back of the horse's mouth where the last tooth is very close to the curve of the jaw. A well-trained dentist knows how to reduce this long point without damaging the back of the mouth.

THE YOUNGER HORSE

Young horses with new teeth erupting every year need to be checked every six to 12 months until they are five and have a full set of permanent teeth. By managing a young horse's mouth while the teeth are erupting, you avoid the creation of a wave mouth, which happens when the upper or lower baby tooth remains on top of the permanent tooth, and the opposing tooth gets worn down more than it should. Now you have some teeth that are longer than others, and the opposing teeth on the other half of the mouth get worn to match. Since a horse chews his food by moving his mouth in an elliptical motion, like a side-to-side figure eight, these uneven teeth will block the

possibilities of motion, preventing your horse from chewing his food properly, which can cause both colic and poor digestion of nutrients.

A good dentist can modify a wave mouth, but it is better not to let it start in the first place. If someone tries to modify a wave mouth in an older horse, they can loosen the teeth because of the short roots. A wave mouth can also shorten your younger horse's life, because in order to take out the wave, you must file down a tooth that will be needed later in his life, so you have again reduced the time he will have good teeth to chew with. Young horses have a pulp chamber that lies just under the crown of the tooth. If the person floating the young horse's teeth is not well trained, they could shorten the teeth too much, getting into the pulp chamber and killing the tooth. As the horse ages, the pulp chamber is not so close to the surface.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS

In summary, always ask questions. Where did your equine dentist get their dental training? How many hours did they train for? Do they hold a state certification? Can you feel in your horse's mouth before and after the floating? Check out the dentist's instruments — are they clean and well cared for? If you are using a veterinarian to float your horse's teeth, ask them if they have taken advanced training. A well-trained and competent professional will respect your questions and should be willing to provide you with the necessary information to guarantee they have your horse's best interests in mind.

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