

More Questions and Some Answers About Equine Dentistry



by Dr. Sarah Metcalf, DVM

A recent discussion on Equine Clinician's Network, an email list for veterinarians on which I am a long-time lurker, inspired me to try to answer horse owners' questions about equine dentistry. You might be surprised to realize that there is disagreement among veterinarians on these topics!

The following articles represent my opinions, perspectives and perceptions; they include unsubstantiated anecdotes and subjective experiences. Also, if I quote a person who sounds suspiciously like someone you know, thinly disguised, it probably is that person.

How can I tell if my horse's teeth need floating?

I don't know. Myself, I can't tell without a thorough look in the mouth with a speculum. Put me out in a field of a hundred horses and tell me their life stories, and I still will not be able to tell you, without looking in their mouths, which one will have the worst problem.

If we wait until horses show us overt symptoms of pain and dysfunction, very often we are WAY behind in terms of correcting the problem, sometimes too far to do more than mitigate the results of years of neglect.

How is it that horses can stay fat, appear to be cheerful and even perform work competently....and still have dental problems?

1. Based on thousands of examinations, I find that sharp enamel points causing oral ulcerations are extremely common, even in horses with no outward clinical signs.

Some horses continue to eat with enthusiasm even with oral lesions that would certainly be painful if they were in our mouths. These horses have a strong commitment to eating (it does mean survival, after all). This doesn't mean that the lesions are not painful; these horses are eating in SPITE of discomfort.

A somewhat skeptical person who acted as my assistant last spring became convinced that even

fat horses can benefit from dental care when she saw how many overweight horses have obvious sores in their mouths caused by sharp points that hurt OUR fingers when we felt them. Her conclusion vis-à-vis fat horses: "Dietary mis-management (overfeeding) is not an excuse for dental neglect!"

At the other end of the spectrum, not all horses have this level of commitment. Some will stop eating efficiently, and demonstrate abnormal chewing and/or weight loss, with even minor lesions.

One horse in my practice, ("The Princess"), begins to decline to eat, and to throw her hay around, when she develops the most minor points. The first time this happened, the owner brought me a video of the horse's behavior at feeding time. It was so weird that I thought it was a neurological problem and I was certain that I would have to refer the case to a specialist. However, it resolved within 3 days following dental care. This scenario has repeated itself four times now, at 9-18 month intervals. Give this horse few more neural circuits and she can just use WORDS to tell her owner that she would like a dental tune-up.

2. Malocclusions (waves, hooks, ramps, etc.) are also very common, and again, some horses will be—for a while—fat, happy and competent in spite of having malocclusions. These horses have "forgiving" metabolisms (like me: we can stay plump on the pine cone and snowball diet); tolerant dispositions/strong work ethics (unlike me: I'd be real cranky and go on strike).

Even in these tolerant horses, the problems will come home to roost as the horse enters its teens and early twenties. FINALLY the horse begins to lose weight, gets an exam, and a serious situation is found. This can be very frustrating and sad! Many times the horse is still sound and usable; sometimes it is a beloved child's horse or long-time "family member". These serious malocclusions and prematurely expiring teeth don't just suddenly pop

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