



DENTAL CARE IN HORSES

Healthy teeth, healthier horse

Regular dental care is an extremely important part of good horse husbandry. Studies conducted in the mid 2000's at the University of Queensland Veterinary School established that dental health was the single most important determinant of good health in older horses, and horses that have had regular dental care during their life stay healthier for longer.

Regular dental care is both important to correct and prevent any abnormalities for health purposes, as well as making sure there are no issues which will affect performance. Horses that develop behaviours like head tossing, or reluctance on either rein may have a dental problem, like sharp points causing cheek ulcers. Young horses that are cutting teeth and losing caps also often need intervention, and getting a young horse's teeth examined and treated prior to breaking in can prevent painful sores developing in the mouth, and reduce the risk of bad behaviours developing.

We recommend all horse have annual dental checks and treatment, especially horses in regular work. Sharp points can not only cause cheek and tongue ulcers, the pain associated with chewing can alter the way the horse chews. This can set up an imbalance in the jaw, and may result in permanent abnormalities in the mouth, which can lead to early loss of teeth if not corrected in time. Younger horses less than 10 years old tend to have slightly "softer" teeth, which develop sharp points and hooks more readily than older horses.

Also, how quickly horses teeth wear down is dependent on their diet. Some grasses are high in silicates, and this can wear down teeth quicker than other diets. Pelleted feeds tend to be less abrasive.

As most horses approach their late teens, their molar teeth (back cheek teeth) start to lose their enamel and the teeth can "pit out" and become smooth. This usually happens on upper (maxillary) molar teeth first, which then allows the lower teeth to overgrow, and interfere with the chewing cycle, creating, among other conditions, a "wave mouth", where the cheek teeth are all at different heights.

A normal horse chews 30,000 to 50,000 times a day, and therefore any abnormality will soon create problems with the teeth and jaw. Some teeth get feed impacted around them, causing infection, which can be painful, and some teeth will start to loosen, making feeding a painful experience.

GYMPIE VETERINARY SERVICES

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The cheek teeth are very important, as they do all the grinding of the feed. The cheek teeth, especially those at the back, *can only be examined properly using a good quality Hausman gag.*

There are lay dentist who advertise their services as: “No gag, no stress”.

We firmly believe this is poor dental practice.

A “Hausman gag” is commonly used in horses, and is essential to allow thorough examination of the mouth and all the teeth. To just hold a horses tongue to feel the teeth is inadequate, and not a thorough examination. It is also difficult and potentially harmful to a horse to have someone attempt to file rough edges off the teeth without a gag, as there is inadequate control over the mouth, tongue and jaw. If a horse bites hard down on a metal rasp inside it’s mouth, it could potentially fracture pieces off a tooth, which can cause long term dental problems.

It is extremely important to do a detailed manual **and** visual examination of the mouth, and this cannot be achieved without a gag. Under low level sedation, most horses tolerate the gag very well. We often see horses that have had recent “no gag” dental treatment, and found that there are still ulcers on their cheeks near their molar teeth, and the sharp points on their molars still present. Without a gag it is extremely difficult to treat properly the molar teeth, especially the last two, as they are so close to the angle of the jaw. We often also encounter hooks on the last (#11) lower molars, which can only be treated with a gag on.

At Gympie Veterinary Services, we have 2 full dental kits, complete with quality instruments and specifically designed magnetised LED light which we attach to the gag and this allows us to conduct a detailed visual inspection of the mouth and teeth. Our clients really appreciate the opportunity to look inside a brightly lit mouth and see where there are problems.

We have five Veterinarians who have undergone training by specialists in the latest Equine Dental therapies, especially the proficient use of Powerfloats. The practice has invested in 2 Powerfloats, which allows dental treatment to be completed in shorter time, and with a smoother finish than hand tools.

If you have a horses losing weight or dropping its feed, or you simply want the best preventative dental therapy available for your horse, please contact our clinic to arrange a detailed dental examination and required treatment.

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