

EQUINE DENTISTRY

by Dr. Laura Harris

Routine dental care is an integral part of complete equine health maintenance. In a normal moderate use adult horse annual exams are probably sufficient. In special cases, such as young growing horses, horses entering training, horses that have pre-existing abnormalities, or horses that are routinely required to work "on the bit" dental examination and dental work will be required more frequently for optimum results.

While minor problems such as sharp molar edges can be addressed by simple "floating", no dental examination should be considered complete without an open-mouth speculum exam. Some horses will tolerate this without sedation, but the majority will be more comfortable and cooperative after tranquilization.

Non-veterinarian equine dentists are not allowed under state statute to prescribe or administer sedatives (tranquilizers). While these dentists are often well trained and talented, it is not reasonable to expect them to accept the liability of sedating your horse for dental procedures. When needed sedatives, anti-inflammatory drugs (such as Bute or Banamine), and antibiotics should be used under the supervision of a veterinarian.

It is productive to promote a good working relationship between your dentist and your regular veterinarian by scheduling the veterinarian to sedate for the dentist. Sedation appointments can often be combined with routine health care or vaccination appointments to maximize time usage for the veterinarian and minimize expense for you. It is also possible to utilize a veterinarian with specialty training in dentistry to manage your horses' dental needs. Regardless of which combination of talents you utilize, the important goal is routine, thorough dental examinations and care for your horses.

The following schedule is based on the expected needs of the "normal" horse. The schedule should be modified to meet individual needs.

Birth -- Oral exam done during the neonatal veterinary exam to assess "bite" and palate for abnormalities.

6-8 months - All deciduous incisors (front baby teeth) should be visible. Have the "bite" checked in conjunction with the fall vaccination appointment with your veterinarian.

1 1/2 – 2 years – Check for "wolf teeth" and remove them if present. Check for sharp molar points and hooks and reduce as needed. Create a modified "bit seat" in horses scheduled for training.

2 - 3 years - Check again for “wolf teeth” and check sites of previous removal for inflammation. Check for loose incisor (front) deciduous (baby) teeth and for deciduous molars (“caps”). Reduce any sharp molar points or hooks and level the molar tables to balance the mouth if needed. Maintain the “bit seat” in horses being ridden.

3 - 4 years - Check again for retained deciduous incisors and molar “caps”. Reduce molar points and hooks. Maintain the “bit seat”.

5 years and up – Check for level incisor (front teeth) occlusion and lateral excursion (sideways mobility). Check for abnormal wear patterns, points and hooks on molars. Check for loose or broken teeth. Address as indicated.

Regularly scheduled routine proactive dental care will enhance performance in all riding disciplines, maximize feed utilization, and optimize your horses' comfort while riding and while eating.