

The Equine Balance Equation:

**Balanced Teeth + Balanced Feet +
Balanced Muscles +
A Balanced Rider = A Balanced Horse.**

Part One of a Four Part Series:

Proper Equine Dental Care:

Facts your horse wishes you knew.

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Why do many horse owners faithfully have a farrier tend to their horse's feet, but ignore or dismiss the horse's need for proper dental care? Do these owners have no concern for the horse's dental needs? No! They just don't know what these dental needs are. Hooves are very visible; they're right in plain view. Teeth are not easily seen and the threat of being bitten discourages most horse owners from inspecting them.

All a horse owner really needs to know, is what the horse's dental needs are, when dental care should be provided and why this care is necessary. An educated owner can ensure their horse's dental needs are met, without ever placing their hand in the horse's mouth. 'Educated' is the key word. Owners need to carefully choose a qualified equine dentist, just as they choose a qualified farrier.

The following is a 'guide-line', to briefly explain the process a horse's mouth goes through during the course of its life and some potential problems that can be encountered and corrected/prevented.

Horses experience constant changes in their mouths. Their teeth change in eruption rate (rate at which the teeth move up through the gum-line), size, shape and density as the horse ages. This is why proper dental care is so important. When a horse's mouth is comfortable, he chews efficiently, maintains his weight and is more willing to accept the bit. If a horse is experiencing mouth pain, his attention will be on the pain, not on the person training him.

From birth to the age of five years, a horse loses all of its baby teeth and the permanent teeth move into position. This is a very critical time period for the

horse. While the horse is being broke to ride and drive, his mouth is experiencing major changes.

One problem is the eruption of wolf teeth, which occurs between five and eight months of age. These teeth are located on both sides of the upper jaw, in front of the molars where a bit would rest. These small teeth can get hit by the bit when the reins are pulled back, causing moderate to severe pain. In an attempt to escape from this pain, a horse may; grab the bit, toss his head up in the air, bolt, refuse to turn/bend, or even rear-up. It is important to have the wolf teeth removed prior to placing a bit in the horse's mouth. Effective training requires trust. If the horse feels pain as soon as you start, the whole training process may be a bad experience.

Young horses loose their baby teeth between 2.5 and 4.5 years of age. These baby teeth are called 'caps'. Caps should fall out on their own, but if they don't, caps must be removed, to allow the permanent teeth to move into place.

If a cap fails to shed, one of several things will happen:

- 1) The permanent tooth may erupt next to the cap, which creates a misalignment. (The adult tooth will not be in line with the rest of the adult teeth.)
- 2) A cap may stick up higher than the rest of the row of teeth (Due to the adult tooth trying to move into position.), which causes a pressure point and pain.
- 3) The permanent teeth will continue to erupt and may be forced backwards toward the sinuses or into the lower jaw, if a cap prevents the adult teeth from moving into place.

These situations can cause a horse severe pain and a trainer major frustration. The good news is that these situations can be corrected/prevented by the owner recognizing and accepting the need for equine dental care. Note: Proper dental care does not make up for a lack of training, but it does make the horse more comfortable and ensures the trainer that continued poor behavior is not teeth related. Give the horse the benefit of the doubt.

By age five, the horse should have a full set of permanent teeth. His teeth will continue to erupt and the natural chewing action of the horse wears his teeth down. This chewing action creates sharp edges on the outside edge of the upper molars and on the inside edge of the lower molars. These sharp edges must be smoothed down and the proper molar table angles must be maintained to provide an effective chewing motion. Proper dental care ensures efficient utilization of grain and hay, easier acceptance of the bit and a better attitude toward working and training.

Horses in the age range of 1 to ~15 years, should have their teeth floated by an equine dental technician two times a year. This is due to the rate at which the teeth are erupting and the softer density of the teeth. After fifteen years, the eruption rate slows down and the teeth become harder/denser. Sharp edges and

ridging occur at a slower rate and a visit by the dentist once a year is usually sufficient. Note: Every horse is an individual and needs to be treated that way. These are 'guide-lines'; each horse's own needs must be addressed.

As horses age, their molars are exposed to more grinding action than the incisors. (The front teeth right behind the lips.) In the wild, the incisors are worn down by pulling at roughage and grazing on abrasive vegetation. Our domestic horses, living on processed grain and hay, do not wear down their molars and incisors evenly. If the horse's incisors are slightly longer than the molars, the horse is taken out of occlusion. (When the horse closes his mouth, his incisors come together, but the molars do not.) Now the horse can not properly grind up his food. The horse will start dropping grain, leaving balls of hay and losing weight no matter how much you feed him. The food the horse does swallow, is not properly digested, most of it passes right through the horse. Evidence of this is whole grains and stems of hay in his manure and unexplained weight loss. Over-long incisors can be reduced and realigned to restore the molar-to-incisor balance and aid the horse in chewing properly again. Your equine dentist should be able to perform this procedure. (Ask to make sure.) This procedure will require the horse to be sedated, therefore your veterinarian must be there to sedate and assist. Don't leave your vet out of the loop!

Proper dental care is one aspect of equine care that often gets overlooked. An owner should not wait until there is an obvious problem with the horse's mouth; example, dropping feed, losing weight, fighting the bit, refusing to bend or rearing. Having your horse's teeth floated and balanced should be a routine maintenance procedure, not only for problem correction.

Do you as a horse owner wait until your horse's feet are over long and starting to crack before you call the farrier? Of course not! So don't wait until your horse is dropping feed and losing weight before you call your equine dentist.

Remember: A Balanced Horse, has Balanced Teeth.
***(Note: Balanced teeth are only part of the Equine Balance Equation:
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All of the training in the world will not produce a sound, supple, balanced horse, unless the horse starts with a solid, balanced foundation.

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