We all want the best for our horses, as we do ourselves. Good nutrition, a comfortable place to live and good medical and dental care are all required for a healthy lifestyle. No matter if you have owned horses for 30 years or just purchased your first horse, you need to make informed decisions regarding equine dentistry. The reality is that equine dentistry involves working in the mouth, an enclosed area that is mostly hidden from the outside world. Unlike the farrier, whose work is out in front for everyone to see and critique, the work of anyone who is doing dentistry is literally out of sight. So, let’s start with the ability to see what is going on in your horse’s mouth.

**Examination**

A normal adult horse with a full set of canines and wolf teeth has a total of 44 teeth, which means there are 32 teeth that are behind the front teeth or incisors. Your horse should have the same complete exam as your family dentist does on you, with a light and your mouth open, prior to beginning work. Anyone who is doing equine dentistry without a full mouth speculum and a good light source has a very real chance of missing problems and irregularities. If you can’t see or feel these problems, how can you fix them? A dental exam includes looking for damage from sharp teeth, such as ulcerations in the cheeks, and irregularities that affect the chewing surface such as hooks, ramps and waves. The incisors, premolars and molars should be checked for malocclusions, which is when the teeth don’t meet properly, and for irregular angles. A complete examination is the first essential step to keep from “floating” in the dark.
Dental exams should start within a few days of birth to identify any defects that may require early treatment. Most horses get their first real exam and dentals as late yearlings or early 2 year olds. I recommend that all horses get their first dental at least 2-4 weeks prior to putting any type of bit in their mouth. The horse will be much more comfortable and responsive when the teeth have been equilibrated and the wolf teeth removed. After that, exams and dentals should be performed every 6 to 12 months depending on the horse, use and age.

**2 Instrumentation**

During the past 19 years, the field of equine dentistry has changed significantly for the better. Human dentistry has evolved from the days of the Wild West with a tooth extraction in the barber’s chair to today’s crowns, veneers, restorations and a variety of anesthetics. Equine dentistry has had more advances in equipment, procedures and research than ever before. We better understand how different dental irregularities affect the ability to chew, gain weight and the horse’s overall comfort while being ridden. This information has provided knowledge on how dentistry can enhance the performance characteristics in the equine athlete.

It is often difficult to break free from old ideas and habits that have been ingrained in our minds. The important thing to note is that your horse deserves the same quality treatment as you do. It is important that all horse owners seek out competent professionals who perform equine dentistry, as the concept of doing complete equine dentistry is very important for your horse. There are a few factors to know to understand the significance.

First is “floating”, which is rasping or blunting the sharp points that form on the teeth through normal wear as horses eat. These points are usually located on the cheek side of the upper teeth and the tongue side of the lower teeth. These sharp points
can cut, abrade and pierce the surrounding soft tissue. The horse has an upper jaw that is wider than the lower jaw and so it is offset and has a table or chewing angle of 10-15 degrees. This “floating” is the first step, which can be done with motorized equipment or hand floats.

The use of motorized equipment is a very safe and effective means to perform equine dentistry when used properly. Just as you or I don't want to sit in a dentist’s chair any longer than necessary, your horse's patience also runs out if the procedure goes too long. With the motorized equipment I can do a cleaner, less irritating, more efficient and quicker procedure that result in overall comfort for your horse.

3 YOUNG HORSE DENTISTRY

It is very important to remember that a horse has what is called hypsodont teeth, meaning that the teeth wear and erupt continuously during their lifetime. Even though a foal is born with some teeth, the real active time of tooth growth is between 2 years 6 months of age and 5 years. This is when most irregularities start to form in the mouth due to imbalances and uneven eruption of new incisors, premolars and molars.

It is very important to have quality professional dentistry performed on young, growing horses. Correcting a mouth's balance is essential in establishing a comfortable and efficient horse. There are three main areas of interest regarding balancing: the incisors, the premolars/molars and the TMJ or temporomandibular joint. The TMJ is where the lower jaw or mandible hinges on the head for jaw movement. For the mouth to be balanced there must be even contact with all the teeth including the incisors. It is important to make sure that all three areas are working together in unison.

4 SEDATION

It is my opinion, to SAFELY perform a complete exam followed by necessary dental procedures, sedation is a must. Dentistry can be very difficult and potentially dangerous since your horse probably dislikes the dentist as much as you do. If you create an environment that is as
relaxed and as safe as possible, then it is a better experience for all parties involved. Today’s sedatives have a very good safety record and do a very good job of relaxing the horse. A relaxed horse allows for more accurate examination and dentistry which results in a better quality result.

Equine dentistry has greatly improved over the last two decades. The knowledge, equipment and research recently gained in equine dentistry has allowed us to help our horses eat more efficiently, perform as a more balanced athlete and led an overall more comfortable life. We all want to be good stewards for our horses and quality equine dentistry is an essential part of that.

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