

## Your Horse's Teeth

Caring for horse's teeth is no new subject or idea. There is evidence of equine dentistry dating back to around 2,000 B.C., and there is also writing in British veterinary journals describing floating and bit seats as far back as 1865. In fact, one could argue that, in the late 1800's, horses' teeth received superior care compared to the care they received during the 1900's. In the last 25 years, there has been resurgence in equine dental care. Many advances in both dental instruments and in our understanding of optimal teeth function have been developed. Thus, from a horse's perspective, there is no better time to be alive than the present, at least with regard to dentistry. This leads to many questions.

***Who should perform dental procedures on my horse's teeth?*** The law in Nebraska is clear on this subject. It is illegal for any person to float or perform dental procedures unless he/she is a licensed veterinarian or a licensed veterinary technician under the direct supervision of a veterinarian (which means the veterinarian must be present in the same room while the procedure is being performed). These laws are in place to protect the public (in this case, horse owners) from fraud or from individuals who have not received the proper training to perform equine dental procedures.

***What are the symptoms that my horse needs dental work?*** These symptoms can be observed from two different perspectives, the first being problems associated with eating.

1. Dribbles grain when eating.
2. Fills mouth with hay before eating.
3. Dunks hay in water.
4. Excessive salivation while eating.
5. Foul odor from mouth.
6. Head tilt while eating.
7. Weight loss.
8. Undigested feed in manure.

The second set of problems is associated with performance.

1. Resists turning while ridden.
2. Head tossing or shaking.
3. Mouthing or chewing bit.
4. Excessive salivation.
5. Head tilt while riding or lunging.
6. Resists bridling.
7. Some lamenesses.
8. Refuse to maintain frame or vertical head carriage.

***What should I expect when my horse receives dental work?*** A complete history should be taken, searching for problems similar to the ones described above. This should be followed with a mouth exam. Any work on the teeth should be completed with the aid of a full mouth speculum and with standing sedation. A mouth speculum is an instrument that has a ratcheting mechanism which holds the mouth open, allowing for visual assessment and for digitally feeling the teeth to assess their condition. Sedation allows the veterinarian to safely and more effectively accomplish the tasks at hand. At this time, the teeth are usually floated using either hand rasps or some form of power equipment to remove sharp edges and to reshape teeth to alleviate the pain generated by the problem areas. This procedure usually takes about 20 to 30 minutes per horse.

***How often does my horse need to be checked?*** Most horses need to be floated on a yearly basis. This varies by individual horse – some as short as every six months and some as long as eighteen months. It is our belief that proper dental care is one of the most important ways to extend a horse's useful life by many years.