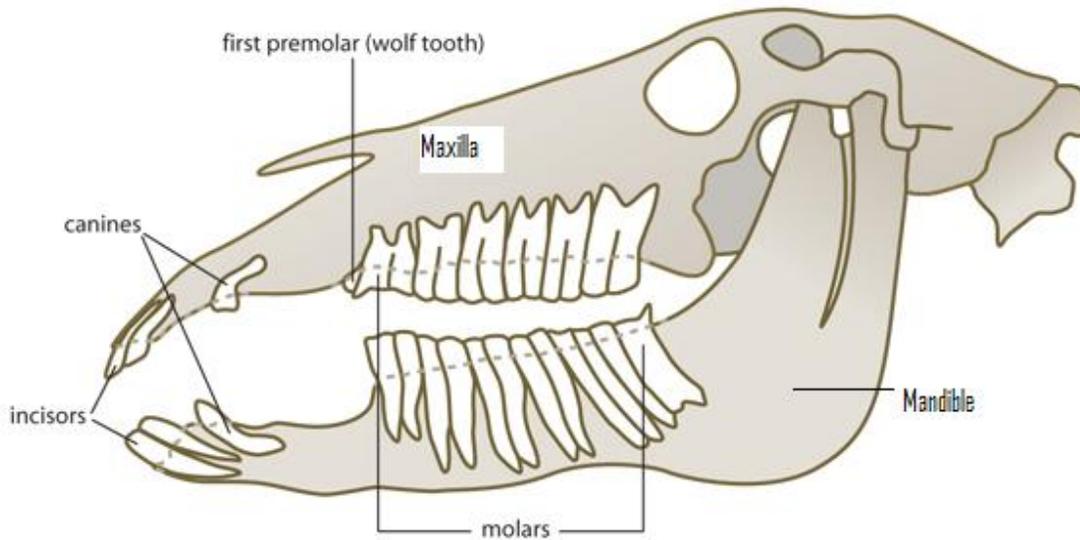


Horses need a dentist too!



Adult horses can have 36-44 teeth with the average tooth being 4 inches long. That's a LOT of teeth! When a horse chews its food the lower jaw (mandible) actually moves in a circular pattern, unlike humans who chew their food

with an up and down motion of the mandible. This circular motion is important to grind the food and make it digestible for the horse; however it also causes a very predictable pattern of wear on the surface of the cheek teeth, also called molars. Because the upper jaw (maxilla) is wider than the mandible, when the mandible moves it causes the inside of the upper cheek teeth and the outsides of the lower cheek teeth to wear down. As the inside of the upper teeth is getting worn down the outside of the same teeth is not getting worn down and continues to grow, which over time results in sharp points on the outside of the upper cheek teeth and the insides of the lower cheek teeth.

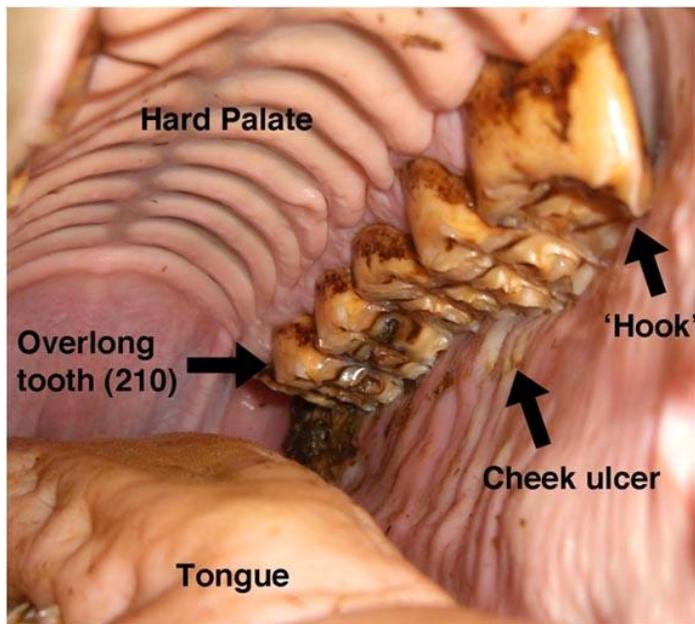


The amount of time a horse spends chewing and the type of food that it chews (grass, hay, grain, supplements) dramatically affects the way the teeth wear and how quickly the sharp points form. Horses living in the wild spend over half of every day chewing and chew more fibrous diets than horses that are domesticated. These factors combine to make dental problems less common in wild horses. Additionally, wild horses don't live as long as domesticated horses so they have less time to develop dental abnormalities. Some bad habits that a lot of stabled horses have, such as chewing on wooden fences and cribbing, also negatively impact how the teeth wear. When points on the teeth are very small they may not cause any obvious problems but as they get larger you may start to notice

some things. Signs that your horse has a dental abnormality may include any of the following: resistance to take the bit, throwing the head when being ridden, dropping food when eating, spitting out large wads of hay, weight loss, facial swelling, and bad breath.

By the time you notice some of the above signs, the dental abnormalities may be severe. To prevent things from getting to this stage it is recommended that every horse have an annual dental evaluation. A yearly exam provides the opportunity to find problems when they are in the early stages and correct them before severe problems develop. Horses don't have their full set of adult teeth until they are about 5 years old. Therefore, horses that are 2-5 years old may need more frequent dental care to keep up with all the changes occurring in their mouth during this time.

To examine your horse's teeth the veterinarian will sedate your horse and put a large metal gadget, called a speculum, in their mouth. The speculum allows us to look and feel in their mouth without the risk of getting bitten. Once an examination of the cheek teeth has been performed, the cheek teeth will be "floated". Floating is the term used to describe removing the sharp enamel points. There are two main categories of "floats", hand floats and power floats. Hand floats are like long sharp files and have been around for a long time. Power floats are like a long handled electric drill with a sharp burr on the end and are a more recent development in equine dentistry. The main advantages of using a power float are that it doesn't require as much physical strength to operate and you can finish the procedure much quicker.



Pictured to the left are the upper left cheek teeth of a horse prior to floating. As you can see in the picture the edges of the teeth that are against the cheek tissue are very sharp and have caused a small ulcer. There is also a hook on the first cheek tooth and one of the back cheek teeth has grown too long. These are all common findings during a routine yearly dental examination and can easily be corrected with appropriate floating.

More severe problems include fractured teeth, wave mouth, step mouth, misaligned incisors, abscessed tooth roots, cavities, and periodontal (gum) infections. These severe problems can develop from a lack of proper dental care sometimes the structure of a horse's mouth can predispose them to certain painful conditions.

Equine dentistry has changed and advanced significantly over the past 10 years. Cavities and periodontal infections never used to be recognized or treated but as the equipment and diagnostic tools have advanced, veterinarians are spending more time looking in horses mouths and finding abnormalities we never knew were there before. Teeth with cavities that would have been pulled or left to rot in the past can now be treated and saved. And painful periodontal infections, which were not diagnosed when floating teeth first came about, can easily be recognized with the help of a mirror to look between all the teeth. As always, prevention and early diagnosis is less expensive and more effective than treatment once a problem has become severe. Proper dental care will help your horse live a longer more comfortable life. To schedule a dental exam for your horse contact Woodview Veterinary Clinic today!

