



Q&A FROM A HORSE DENTIST

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Is It Really a Parrot Mouth?

Question: "I purchased a four year old dapple grey gelding at an auction early this spring. After reading an article in the *Northern Horse Review*, magazine about horse dentistry I took a look in his mouth. The first thing I noticed when I pushed his lips out of the way was, his teeth, they didn't come together like my other horses. As a matter of fact, the easiest way for me to describe it – an exaggerated case of bucked teeth. I was told it was an uncorrectable and sometimes, terminal condition called a PARROT MOUTH. I have come to love this recent arrival and before I just give him up I thought I would ask the horse dentist what to do."

Answer: As in most cases when responding to an article, it is impossible to diagnose your gelding without being onsite. However, I can tell you what I know about parrot mouths and what I have experienced personally.

I've gotten calls of concern many times about parrot mouths, but when I get to the scene, their teeth tell me a different story. Let me tell you why.

A true parrot mouth is a genetic (birth) defect. The skull is longer than the jaw therefore, the upper and lower teeth don't line up properly. As the horse matures, his teeth erupt, forcing the lower teeth to grow back and behind the upper teeth similar to this described dapple grey gelding, "an exaggerated case of buck teeth". The opposite occurs with miniature horses. They have a genetic predisposition to an underjet, (the jaw outgrows the skull). No one knows why these conditions occur, we just know they seriously compromise proper mastication and require vigilant dental maintenance throughout the horse's life.

Improper Feeding Can Create a Simulated Parrot Mouth

Anytime a horse lifts his nose off the ground, his jaw should slide back. Therefore, consider where and how you feed. Feeding in bunks above ground level or feeding round bales elevates your horse's head, causing him to eat in an unnatural position by forcing his jaw back and out of alignment. Since they grind small particles of molar with every chew, an elevated head causes his molars to wear unevenly. This uneven wear pattern develops hooks on the front of the upper molars and ramps on the back of the lower molars.

However it is important to note that what some diagnose as a parrot mouth is merely an overbite caused by hooks, ramps, protuberances or an improper angle change. Each are considered, in the dental industry, correctable dental abnormality. Hooks or ramps on the front upper or back lower molars can cause the jaw to shift backward. Protuberant teeth prevent proper movement of the jaw when a horse closes his molars together; occurring when a cap refuses to shed at the proper age allowing the opposing tooth to grow in its stead. Changing the angle of the incisors can also make a horse appear to have a parrot mouth. All of these dental abnormalities prevent the jaw from moving and grinding freely either from the front to back or from side to side.

In my dental practice of 7500 head or better at this writing, I have only seen three true parrot mouths. The rest have been abnormally induced and have been able to correct each within one to three appointments.

Overbites cause not only further dental deterioration if not properly addressed but negatively impact the horse's health, ride-ability and in some extreme cases, the ability to show or even breed. I would recommend you take your four year old dapple grey to a certified equine dentist who has been trained in corrective dental procedures such as the one you've described for an accurate diagnosis. If it is an overbite caused by one of the dental abnormalities discussed previously, if your dentist is certified, he will have the training necessary to make the proper adjustments. On the flip side, if it is a true parrot mouth, unopposed incisors grow at a faster rate than when opposed. (Normal tooth eruption, 1/8" annually) Depending on the health of your horse, your dentist might perform a significant amount of reduction before your horse finds relief from the excessive incisor length and a regular maintenance program will be your saving grace.

Remember, all undesirable actions are compensatory to some point of pain and attributes to a horse's balance and ability to perform. If you are experiencing undesirable behaviors while riding your horse, have a certified equine dentist take a look, to get the answer '*straight from your horse's mouth*'.

If you have a question about your horse's teeth and how they might relate to his health or performance call 1-306-747-2724, 1-403-936-5394, 1-208-420-2701 or e-mail mackequine@sasktel.net.