



Q&A FROM A HORSE DENTIST

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TO BIT OR NOT TO BIT(?)

QUESTION: "I board my horse at a facility where the horse dentist comes twice a year. I ride my horse with a halter instead of a bit, yet some of my friends tell me I should have him looked at. The literature I've read about equine dentistry reads, "have your horse's teeth examined before you put a bit in his mouth." Since I don't ride with a bit – am I short stepping my maintenance program?"

ANSWER: As general rule, horses begin their training in a halter and lead shank, then move into a bit when they are ridden or driven. Very few horses are ridden in a halter throughout their lives. There are however some training programs that teach halter-only riding techniques. Although, since teeth continue to grow, let me tell you some facts about dentistry and where the "pressure points" are when you put a halter, bosal, hackamore or bridle with or without a bit. Then I'll let you come to your own conclusion about your maintenance program.

Captivity alone has caused the need for regular dental care. Observation of horses in the wild, show researchers that their teeth, as well as their feet, are properly maintained by the environment in which they choose to dwell. While in our care, if a horse's teeth are left unattended, small problems become big problems and a downward cycle of poor performance, health, & behavior begin to take hold.

Understanding performance, health and behavioral problems come from knowing that horses use their molars (back teeth) to chew every bite of food and with every "chew", small particles of tooth surface from the molars are ground away. The normal chewing pattern of a horse creates sharp points on the edge of their molars due to the unique shape of their teeth and become "points of pain". These sharp edges and new points of pain develop in young horses in only a few short months.

When a halter or bridle of any kind is introduced, inadvertently the cheeks, tongue and pouchy flesh of a horse's mouth are pushed into these sharp points. The horse indicates they are painful by tossing his head, pushing away with his head, pulls back, noses out through the bit, or becomes difficult to catch, bridle or halter.

Proper horse dentistry or "three-point-balance" not only removes the sharp points from all of the horse's molars but insures the horse's jaw, molars & incisors (front teeth) are in balance through a specific process of adjusting the chewing surfaces, removing irregularities and cutting the incisors down to meet in alignment with the molar table. This allows the three points of balance an opportunity to work comfortably together.

Horses with their teeth routinely and correctly balanced, grind their food correctly and provide horses with good nutrition. Horse nutritionists stand firm with sound statistics of a horse's ability to grind up feed and

the link to properly processing and passing feed evenly through a horse's system. Good nutrition therefore provides for better health. Healthy horses in turn have stronger hooves, a better coat and a stronger resistance to illness. Horses with their teeth balanced, perform better when they are able to freely move their jaw. The horse then begins to listen to the rider and not the pain in their mouth. As a matter-of-fact, studies are now showing an increased number of professional trainers that are finding great success when they have their horse's teeth balanced prior to introducing equipment or getting on their back for the first time.

Young horses change 24 teeth between one and five years of age. They shed 24 baby teeth and find homes for 12 additional permanent teeth in five years; that is 36 teeth needing to find space. Some baby teeth refuse to fall out on their own and can easily act as slivers in a young horse's mouth. Horses between the ages of two and a half and five years old should be looked at every six months to ensure all their teeth are meeting in the middle. Wolf teeth and canines can also be a problem when biting.

You must remember that in order for a horse to ride comfortably and effectively, their jaw must be able to move comfortably side to side and front to back. Any part of this free and fluent movement that is compromised will affect your horse, his ability to properly chew his food and his ability to run, turn, stop and back up. Each horse is affected differently, to a greater or lesser degree.

SPECIFIC PRESSURE POINTS:

Halters, bosals, hackamores push against the outside of the upper molars. The top teeth in a horse are set wider apart than the bottom teeth, leaving the outer edge of the top teeth exposed to the cheek. As you "direct rein" your horse, these halters, bosals and hackamores force the cheek into the sharp points of at least the first two, maybe three teeth, regardless of whether or not there is a bit in your horse's mouth. Bridles with a bit compound these pressure points. They not only draw the cheek into the front few teeth but also pick up the pouchy flesh on the bars and draw it back into the lower teeth depending on the amount of tongue relief your bit affords.

Remember, all undesirable actions are compensatory to any point of pain and attributes to a horse's balance. If you are experiencing any of these undesirable behaviors while riding your horse, have a certified equine dentist take a look and 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 (306) 266-2060 or e-mail your question to mackequine@sasktel.net.