

Q&A from a Horse dentist

Q&A FROM A HORSE DENTIST

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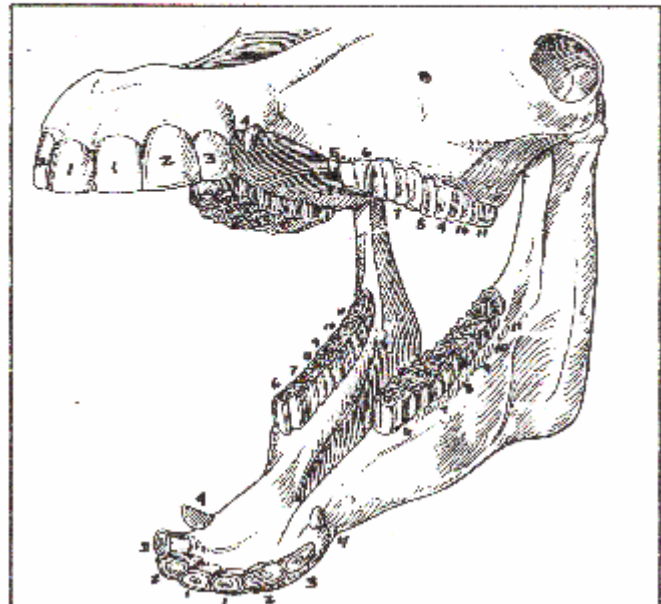
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Dentistry and Young Horses

I am always being asked, "at what age should I have my horse's teeth looked at," in references to young horses. Let me first start by defining 'young' in the context of this article: between the age of one and five years old. As a horse owner, there are three things one should ask themselves before they know when to take their young horse to a dentist. (1) When is the horse scheduled to start training? (2) Is the horse feed hay, pellets or oats? And (3), is the horse feed out of a feed bunk as opposed to, off the ground?

Question number one ... **when is the horse scheduled to start training** ... in the past, horseman didn't start training a young horse until they were almost five years old. The reason for this was, not only had their young horse's bones matured enough to provide a solid day's work but their baby teeth had also stopped falling out and their adult teeth were in full wear. In the horse training profession, teeth are now, one of the biggest hurdles trainers are asked to deal with – especially futurity horse trainers.

If you can think back to when you were losing your baby teeth, every waking moment was on that loose tooth. Eating became a calculated effort – your thoughts were always on "that tooth". It's not much different for a young horse. However, since we train horses at a younger age, losing a tooth while in training can sometimes cause confusion. Therefore, is the horse listening to the loose tooth or the cues provided by the trainer?



INCISORS: A short six days after birth, the teething process begins; the number #1 central deciduous (baby) incisors erupt at 6-8 days, #2 medial deciduous incisors erupt at 6-8 weeks, #3 lateral deciduous incisors erupt at 6-8 months. Their central deciduous incisors (#1) are suppose to fall out at the age of 2½, the permanent central incisors come into wear, (meeting in the middle), six months later or at three years of age. The medial deciduous incisors (#2), fall out at the age of 3½, the permanent medial incisors come into wear, six months later or at four years of age. The lateral (corner) deciduous incisors (#3), fall out at the age of 4½, the permanent lateral incisors come into wear, six months later or at five years of age.

MOLARS: young horses are born with the first three deciduous molars (#6, #7, #8) on the top and bottom, both sides, equalling 12 teeth. The (#6) deciduous molars fall out at 2½ yrs old, the permanent molar comes into wear, six months later or 3 yrs of age. The (#7) deciduous molars fall out at 3 yrs old, the permanent molar comes into wear, six months later or 3½ yrs of age. The (#8) deciduous molars fall out at 3½ yrs old, the permanent molar comes into wear, six months later or 4 yrs of age. #9 permanent molars break the gum at 1 year old, and come into wear at 2 yrs. #10 permanent molars break the gum at 2 years old, and come into wear at 3 yrs old. #11 permanent molars break the gum at 3 years old, and come into wear at 4 yrs old.

In short, a horse will loose 8 baby teeth at 2½ yrs old, 4 more at 3 yrs old, 8 more at 3½ yrs old, and 4 more at 4½ yrs old. Now you can see how teeth can become the number one concern to a trainer working with young horses. (Note: these ages are approximate and can be influenced by feeding, grazing, health as well as overall environmental conditions. Also, stresses such as an early pregnancy, severe sickness, or injury may also alter the maturation of a young horse's dentition.)

The #4 tooth is considered the canine tooth erupting at 4½ yrs of age and the #5 tooth is considered the wolf tooth and erupts between 8 and 18 months of age.

Note: tooth numbering starts in the center of the horses incisors and counts back to the last molar

Remember, horses learn through a trainer's appropriate timing of pressure and release. If the trainer asks a young horse to yield off his leg at the same time a loose tooth causes a sharp pain in his mouth, what did the trainer just teach him? More and more horse trainers are demanding that horses coming into training shall have their teeth looked at by a certified horse dentist prior to being booked into training for this very reason alone. When a young horse isn't thinking about a loose tooth, their mind stays on their training. Training therefore becomes efficient, staying on schedule, – instead of becoming a guessing game as to why they "just don't seem to get it".

Second question ... **do you feed your horse hay, pellets or oats** ... if your horse isn't scheduled to be trained until sometime after his 5th birthday, then note that what your horse eats, may make a determination whether your young horse needs to see a dentist. Why? Because horses use their molars to grind every bite of food and with every "chew", small particles of tooth surface from the molars are ground away. However, tooth particles from the incisors are only ground away evenly when a horse nips grass as a daily food source. Therefore, when horse owners provide hay, pellets or grain, the nipping is done for them. Eventually a horse's incisors are so long that they prevent the horse's molars from grinding together properly. Incisors that are too long cause soreness in and around the joint that swings their jaw. The farther the molars are held apart by overgrown incisors, the harder a horse has to work at chewing their food. This causes pain in a horse's joint as they are forced to chew wider and harder than normal.

An easy comparison of understanding would be the soreness "we" would feel after chewing a large, hard piece of bubble gum from the carnival, "all day". The reason we begin to feel pain in our jaw is not that our jaw is out of shape or unaccustomed to chewing. It is because the large piece of hard bubble gum prevents our back teeth from coming together while chewing. Over time this causes us pain in our TMJ. As soon as we spit the wad of gum out, our jaw stops aching.

Question three ... **does your horse eat out of a feed bunk rather than off the ground** ... fact: the only time a horse's teeth line up is when their lips are on the ground (the way they were designed to eat). For whatever reason, horse owners feel the need to provide food in bunks, above ground level. This method of feeding elevates their head and forces their jaw back, knocking the three points of balance out of alignment. Since they grind small particles of their molars with every chew; an elevated head causes their 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, literally locking their jaw out of alignment. A horse suffering with hooks and ramps forces a horse into a tug-of-war with the rider as they try to find and keep a position of comfort; therefore, as speed increases when riding, the head comes up and the nose moves out in front of them (generally to the level of their feed bunk). Head tossing, nosing through the bit & unable to turn without a stiff neck are all common and annoying behaviors caused by hooks and ramps. Behavior problems differ with every horse and their level of tolerance to pain.

In my professional opinion, young horses, especially in training, need to be checked every six months to insure that their teeth are falling out and erupting at the appropriate ages. If you follow this article each month, you will know that a young horse is changing 24 teeth between the age of one year old to five years old. They shed 24 baby teeth and find homes for 12 additional permanent teeth within that five year term – finding space for 36 grinding permanent teeth (males, 40 permanent teeth). Some baby teeth refuse to fall out on their own and can easily act as slivers in a young horse's mouth. The above three questions horse owners can ask themselves provides a guideline in relation to personal use and the different factors that effect their horse's changing dentition.

Remember, all undesirable actions are compensatory to any 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 1-306-763-0386, 1-403-936-5394, 1-208-420-2701 or e-mail mackequine@sasktel.net.