



## Q&A FROM A HORSE DENTIST

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### Spending Prioritized

*I have more horses to do than I can afford*

**Q:** I have twenty-two horses and can't afford the dentistry for them all at the same time. They are all quarter horses but they range in age from weanlings to an eighteen year old. My questions are: who needs to be done, who should I start with and what kind of schedule should my horses be on? (4-broodmares with foals, 1-yearling, 4-two year olds in training, 2-three year olds in training, 1-four year old daily ranch work, 2-five year olds daily ranch work, 1-eight year old youth barrel horse, 1-twelve year old youth barrel horse, 1-sixteen year old youth rope horse, 1-eighteen year old youth rope horse).

**A:** Tough question to answer not only because we just don't see any horses that couldn't be helped in some way with dental care but it's difficult for me to discriminate between particular differing circumstances. The priority I break horses into are: kids horses/safety, behavior issues, horses in training, broodmares, horses in competition, daily use horses and regular care and maintenance. Every horse owner has their own set of priorities and it is not up to me to make that determination. However getting back to your question, your horses fall into five of the seven categories.

First and foremost, I believe horses that children/youth ride should take absolute top priority especially when kids and their horses are involved in any kind of competition. Why? Not because of the competitive edge factor but because:

- Horses can only think of one thing at a time;
- If they suffer from pain caused by dental abnormalities — all the horse can think of is the pain;
- If the horse is only thinking of the pain in their mouth, they are not





thinking of the child's safety;

- When a horse suffers from pain in their mouth they can't be as competitive, therefore not as good at their job as they could be.

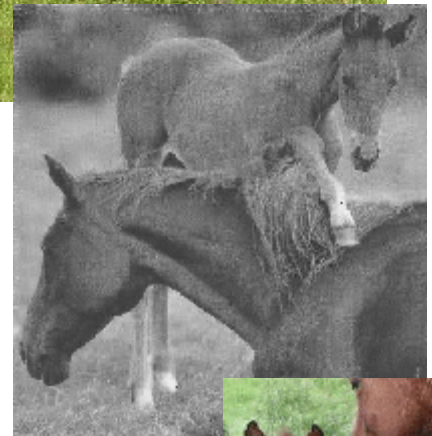
Second to the safety of your children is the confusion young horses suffer when they are sent to a trainer without their teeth being looked at first by a certified equine dentist. If a young horse is

thinking about erupting teeth, wolf teeth or a loose baby tooth, they are unable to focus on the trainer. Young horses, especially in training, need to be checked every six months to ensure 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 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 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. There are many trainers that refuse to take a horse into training without their teeth being checked. They claim they get further ahead with their training, when the horse can concentrate solely on their training. "The horse will get twice as far in his training in half the time when his teeth have been addressed appropriately." Poor performance, lack of progress or bad behavior means more training and leaving it in training for another month or two. Training charges for a month or more cost considerably more than a trip to the dentist.



Third, would be the concern I place on providing "excellent" health conditions possible for broodmares to produce at their best. I often hear, "she's just a broodmare"; and one of the most over looked when it comes to dental care. Broodmares are always eating for two and for a few months of every year, for three; themselves, their foal (at foot) and the fetus (in utero). Therefore if their teeth have not been addressed or are left in poor condition this causes an inability to masticate their feed efficiently limiting the opportunity to pass on suitable nutrition to their foal. When a broodmare is in poor condition they don't put the "blossom" on their foal. Aesthetics are huge when it comes to selling foals and aesthetics comes from the mother's ability to pass on good nutrition to their offspring while keeping themselves in capable condition. Sometimes if they're in poor condition internally, they won't breed back consistently. The function of a broodmare's dentition is critical (whether growing a healthy weanling to be sold or establishing a good growth pattern for a replacement horse) when it comes to making money in the reproductive business.



A correlation is often made between a thin horse and the need for dentistry. However it is not always the thin horses with teeth/behavior problems. Sometimes the fattest horse in the







group in the one with the worst teeth and nastiest attitude.

Behavior issues are the number one reason why I get called to examine a horse. After a performance float and balance, some of my clients have gone from the occasional placing to placing consistently and others have been able to go from competing strictly in amateur events to competing professionally. Either way, it is always more fun to compete when you can count on your horse being there for you. The fact still remains, poor competition performance causes you not to place and traveling to events, paying entry



fees and no prize money gets expensive.

Daily use horses, the ones you spend most of your time with, are sometimes one of the last ones on the list to see a dentist. However you recognize their dentition daily when it comes to comfort and function or lack thereof. Using them every day to get the job done, you know when their

dentition causes them discomfort. When your horse develops a non-desired behavior due to their misaligned dentition; the above may cost you money if their teeth are not addressed, but suffering with the daily challenge caused from poor dentition may lead to an accident or encourage you to eventually sell or replace him. A horse that works is worth more than one that doesn't. Often I hear "we won't worry about that one, we are going to sell him". Selling a horse that doesn't work and buying one that does, cost significantly more than the dentistry. If a horse is capable of doing a job and doesn't do it as well anymore -- quite possibly the one thing that has changed over time is the balance in his mouth. Often times, proper dentistry will give you your "old horse back".



Here's what I think about when I reflect on my own horses . . . if I want my tractor to work consistently an efficiently (longevity), I look after regular oil changes, top off hydraulic oil and blow out the air filter . . . I address the regular maintenance features. If I want my horses to perform consistently (longevity) I need to annually address their dental needs along with the other maintenance requirements. Personally, my wife has found such success with dental maintenance that she has her horses looked at every six months. It is her belief that if sharp edges become critical to a horse's health and performance in 12 months, she would rather maintain comfort at 6 months.



Here's my take on who to do when. Every horse will have sharp enamel points on the outsides of the top molars (along the cheeks) and the insides of the bottom molars (along the tongue). These sharp edges are irritating to soft tissue and over time can cause irritation and eventually ulcer (open sore). A horse in this kind of pain would find it difficult to concentrate on anything other than the area of irritation or trauma in their mouth. How are these sharp enamel points created. A horse's teeth are about five inches long at five years old and continually erupt out of the socket throughout their life. Small particles of tooth are ground away with every bite of food they chew. To sustain life, grazing horses grind their teeth together as they chew their feed approximately 59,000 times every day. This continual grinding creates these sharp edges and are called enamel points. Therefore when we put a halter, bridle or any form of hardware on their head and in their mouth, the soft tissue of a horse's cheek is pushed into the sharp edges of the enamel points. Over time,

ulcers form and so does a compensatory poor behavior issue. This would be a horse in dire need of dentistry regardless of any of the above considerations. I have seen serious ulcers on the inside of horses cheeks caused from sharp points in horses ranging from three months to 19 years of age. Most prominently in horses under the age of 12. Older horses that have not been afforded the value of dentistry have learned to pack feed between their cheek and sharp edges of their teeth, to work as a buffer. Older horses sometimes have severe dental malocclusions due to the problem starting many years earlier. Therefore we have less time, and less eruption (less tooth remaining) to fix the problem.

Who needs to be done (ideally, every horse, every year, I'm sorry but it is up to you to choose who is considered a priority in your herd), who should you start with (again, your personal priority would dictate. In my book, safety is a critical consideration, realizing that when the halter goes on the points come into play, and no one is exempt). What kind of schedule should my horses be on (minimally, horses 5 and up annually, younger horses semi-annually to provide comfort and full performance potential).

I realize that more horses will live out their life without ever seeing a dentist than the ones that receive annual dental maintenance. However, I also firmly believe that a horse will never be all that they could be without regular dental maintenance in two areas specifically, performance and longevity. Most farms and ranches have had a horse that was "the best" at one particular thing or maybe an all-around great horse at everything. As an equine dental specialist I believe that we make marginal horses good and good horses great. It's up to each horse owner to explore their horse's potential. If money is a concern, this article may provide you with a guide how to prioritize your equine dental needs, but for the horse, it sometimes comes down to maintenance or replacement. Either way, cost is merely relative; the fact is, most likely you will pay it out on one end of the equation or the other.

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*'.

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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](mailto:mackequine@sasktel.net).

