



## Q&A FROM A HORSE DENTIST

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# The Importance of a Dental Maintenance Program

To understand the importance of dental maintenance you have to first realize how the horse's jaw moves while under saddle or masticating his food. Understanding the structural requirement for full and free movement of the jaw (forward/backward and side to side) is imperative if you are seeking to have a comfortable, willing riding companion.

A horse is designed to tuck and draw his chin to his chest as he collects or backs up, when he turns, his jaw moves forward and to the side he is being asked to turn. Therefore, any protuberance or irregularities in either the incisor table or molar table will impede full and free movement of the jaw. By preventing the jaw from moving, it makes it difficult to move freely without pain.

Hooks, ramps and protuberant teeth, sheered molar tables and wedged incisors are all causes of pain in a horse's mouth when he attempts to collect, back up or turn. I believe there are varying degrees of pain tolerance that is unique to each horse which provide every rider with a collection of subtle clues as to how he handles the pain in his mouth when asked to perform. Unfortunately, the answers are disclosed when the horse is in a pressure situation. A couple such examples are (1) the need for the horse to compensate for the level of his head prior to performing the task requested by the rider can be very costly especially in timed events; and (2) judged form events, grade on consistency and cadence, both sacrificed when comfort is compromised.

Generally, horses that are not afforded free and full movement are compensatory to the restriction. As the horse's head goes up, and/or the nose tips out, the jaw slides back. Conversely, as his head comes down, the head collects and the jaw slides forward. Therefore, tie downs and cavesons increase the resistance of the horse by forcing marginal compliance. The more resistant your horse is, the less capable of immediate compliance he is able to provide. Restoring full function through regular dental maintenance, will provide your horse with an opportunity to answer with a soft, subtle and immediate response.

A horse lets us know when his mouth is uncomfortable by forcing his head up, stiffening his neck, tipping his nose, rooting-out on the reins, or moving heavy on his front end. If a horse does not 'have-balance' in his mouth he can not 'get-balance' in his feet. I am a firm believer that the potential can be realized in each individual horse, when they are afforded full function and complete comfort, and that only comes with a regular dental maintenance program.

A horse dentist notes that:

- Asymmetrical tooth eruption is one of the most common reasons for malocclusions in young horses;
- Regular dental maintenance is very important to horses with smaller heads. Smaller headed horses have more difficulty retaining ideal dental alignment due to the shortage of space available to

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).