



## Q&A FROM A HORSE DENTIST

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### Don't Wait for Weight Loss

Many times when I'm working on horses in a barn, a predetermined comment will be made about a horse that "obviously" doesn't need dental work done because he is "too fat" or "is in the diet pen already". Surprisingly to many observers, horses maintaining their condition can have some of the worst dental cases. Interestingly enough, when a rider has been fighting with behavior problems I am asked to check a horse's teeth, more times than not – the horse is not down on condition, yet still has a considerably complicated mouth (in dental terminology) that is not functioning as well as it should.

Horses like people are compensatory with their dentition. If it hurts to chew on the left side they will chew on the right side and if it hurts to chew with their head down they will chew with their head raised. Knowledgeable observation of our horses behavior can provide us with clues. Although it is not always drastic, sometimes they are very subtle. For example a horse will raise his head and casually look around as he grinds his food. And of course "we" justify this action with comments like, "he is always very aware of his surroundings".

Horses however, are designed to eat (nip and chew) with their heads close to the ground (with their teeth lined up). Although in captivity, we take away their ability to range free and graduate to the type of fodder of preference. We also take away their natural position of eating by feeding in elevated feed bunks or providing them with a large round bale. If you watch a horse approach and begin eating from a round bale, they start at the top of the bale, with their heads 5 or 6 feet in the air. Just about the time they have eaten their way to the bottom we quickly put another bale in front of them where they again start at the top and work their way to the bottom. The problem with this is that when a horse eats with his head 5 or 6 feet off the ground his jaw slides back (posteriorly) and his teeth no longer line up. Eating for extended periods of time with an elevated head causes certain parts of the teeth to be unopposed and because of the continual erupting of both upper and lower teeth (approximately 1/8" per year) hooks and ramps develop. Hooks and ramps cause the horse significant amount of pain when asked to "frame up" and ride. (In previous articles I have addressed the importance of the jaw to move freely forward and backwards.)

Another indicator of poor dentition is aggression around feed. If several horses eat together you may notice the fat getting fatter and the thin getting thinner because of the aggression of the few. Horses that are aggressive around feed can be in the most pain. Teeth in poor condition cause a horse to take longer to eat therefore driving off others provides comfort in knowing their food source is well protected.

A third indicator of poor teeth are horses said to be the ones that never leave the feed trough. Horses with poor teeth are unable to chew their food up completely before they swallow. This allows large particles of feed to enter their system. These large particles cause voids in their system making the horse feel

continually hungry. This causes two things. First, a horse that is never satisfied needs to continually eat. Second, a horse that can't grind his food up completely needs to eat more than he would normally require since he is only grinding up a portion of each mouth full therefore allowing his body to only get nutrition out of a portion of every mouth full. On the flip side, if a horse's teeth are working together properly, they grind every bite of food they eat into very small particles before they swallow, providing 100% access to the nutrition provided. Many horse owners find significant savings on their feed bill when their horse's teeth are routinely equilibrated.

It is not always the thinnest horses that have the worst teeth, thin horses may just not be as competitive for their food. Between compensation from one side to the other, aggression around a feed source and seemingly continually eating – it may well be said that the horse in the best condition, might have the worst teeth.

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*'.

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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 (306) 266-2060 or e-mail your question to [mackequine@sasktel.net](mailto:mackequine@sasktel.net).