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# The Importance of Equine Dental Care

by Jennifer Warmke

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**Did you know that equine dental disease can lead to pain, tooth loss, and even infections in other organs?**

“Horse’s teeth grow continually throughout their life until sometime in their 20’s,” says Dr. Hannah Evergreen of Evergreen Holistic Veterinary Care – Equine. “Because of this, a preventative health care program for the equine mouth to keep their teeth balanced and free from sharp points is an extremely important part of health care for our horses and something that should be addressed at least once a year.”

Dental floats should always be performed by a veterinarian. Not only is it unsafe for your horse, it is actually illegal in Washington for someone calling themselves an ‘equine dentist’ who is not a veterinarian to perform a dental float procedure. In order to conduct a thorough dental float, sedation is commonly used in order to make the examination and any necessary dental care safer and easier for the horse. As a holistic veterinarian, Dr. Hannah Evergreen goes even further to help relax the horse by using a combination of herbal calmers, flower essences, and aromatherapy to help relax the horse for the procedure so that it is a positive experience for the horse.

“The benefits of using natural calming agents is that a reduced amount of chemical sedation may be necessary,” reports Dr. Hannah Evergreen. “This results in less recovery time and less stress for the horse.”

After sedation, a speculum, which is a specialized instrument used to hold the horse’s mouth open, is used to facilitate a better view inside the horse’s mouth and to provide a safe work environment for both the horse and the veterinarian. While the speculum does not hurt the horse in any way, giving the horse a break and allowing them to close their mouth once or more during the procedure helps prevent jaw soreness from the speculum – much like the soreness we experience when visiting the dentist.

Next your equine veterinarian will examine your horse’s mouth for dental pathology such as hooks, steps, ramps, and waves as well as for complications such as abnormal wear, trauma or ulcerations, tooth decay, or periodontal disease. In most cases there will be sharp points on the outside edge of the upper teeth and the inside edge of the lower teeth that will need to be filed down. These points can cause discomfort when your horse eats and can lead to abnormal chewing patterns which may result in further dental pathology.

If abnormalities are found, your veterinarian will use a dental float instrument to “float” the teeth. “Floating” is simply using a mechanical file or rasp that is used to remove the sharp points and excess tooth material in order to create a balanced surface for the upper and lower molars to come together. The veterinarian will also check the canines and incisors as well as round the front edge of the first cheek teeth in your horse’s mouth (commonly referred to as bit seats) to insure that there is no irritation in the horse’s mouth from pressure on the bit while riding.

## **B**enefits of Proper Dental Care

Did you realize that proper dental care can increase feed utilization, maximize your horse's comfort, improve your horse's overall health and even improve your horse's performance? While the dental exam and float procedure will provide your veterinarian with important information about the overall well-being of your horse, read on to discover some of the lesser known benefits of routine dental care...

Better Health and Longevity – A horse that cannot masticate (grind) its food properly will not be able to get proper nutrition from its feed. This can lead to weight loss, nutritional deficiencies, poor coat and hooves, pain, tooth loss and even infections in other organs should bacteria from infected teeth and gums enter the blood stream and circulate through the body. A healthy horse that has received proper dental care throughout its life will help your horse chew and perform more comfortably for years.

Lower Risk of Choke and Colic – A horse that does not properly and completely masticate its food is at risk for choke because the food particles may clump together and create a mass too large to pass through the esophagus. Partially masticated food that does pass through the esophagus and into the stomach is often not digested properly. This can result in a large impaction of undigested feed that can become trapped in the intestines potentially causing colic.

Improved Performance and Behavioral Issues – Horses that are in pain due to dental abnormalities will often present a variety of behavioral and performance issues. The discomfort the horse is experiencing results in the horse being more focused on finding ways to eliminate the pain (like resisting the bit, head shaking, rearing, etc.) rather than responding to particular aids or training methods. This can manifest itself in TMJ problems which may prevent the horse from relaxing its jaw and moving forward in a rounded frame to extreme discomfort if the horse is wearing a noseband and cannot open his mouth to relieve pressure.

Cost Savings – A horse that can properly masticate its feed will get the maximum nutritional intake from the feed that you are providing it. This may eliminate the need for additional supplementation or even additional feed depending on your horse's individual nutritional requirements.

As with any equine health program, equine dentistry involves prevention. If your horse's teeth are properly cared for, you should be able to avoid many serious dental and health complications that could result in unnecessary pain and suffering for your horse.

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