



Horse Health:

Dental Disease

What is it?

Dental disease in horses refers to any condition affecting the teeth, gums, or oral structures that causes discomfort, dysfunction, or health problems.

Unlike humans, horses have **open-rooted teeth**, which means their teeth continue to erupt throughout life to compensate for wear from chewing. This unique dental anatomy makes horses particularly vulnerable to issues like **sharp enamel points**, **malocclusions**, and **tooth fractures**. At the end of their life, the teeth loosen and may fall out, leaving elderly horses struggling to eat.

Dental disease can affect a horse's ability to eat, perform under saddle, and even their overall health and comfort. It is also a key cause of colic. Regular dental care is essential to prevent these problems from developing or worsening.

What causes it?

Several factors contribute to dental disease in horses:

- **Natural tooth eruption and wear:** Horse teeth erupt at about 2mm per year. If wear is uneven, sharp points or overgrowths can form.
- **Jaw anatomy:** The upper jaw is wider than the lower jaw, leading to uneven contact and enamel overgrowths (sometimes called “sharp points”) – typically on the outside of the upper teeth, and on the inside of the lower. This leads to sharp edges and, over time, potentially malocclusions.
- **Diet:** Horses fed mostly concentrates or soft feeds may not grind

their teeth enough to wear them down evenly.

- **Age:** Older horses may suffer from worn-out teeth, loose teeth, or gaps that trap food. These gaps may cause infected **gum pockets** to form, or even cause abnormality of wear on the opposite teeth (as they are not being worn down), leading to malocclusions.
- **Malocclusions:** Misaligned teeth can cause uneven wear and discomfort, or even, in severe cases, “tooth lock” where a horse cannot chew or even open its jaw properly.
- **Wolf teeth:** These small, usually non-chewing, teeth can interfere with bit placement and cause pain, or fracture causing pain and infection.

Tooth fractures are not uncommon, and can expose the pulp cavity. This can lead to a **tooth root abscess** which may burst into the nasal cavities from the upper jaw, or out through the skin.

What horses are at risk?

All horses are at risk of dental disease, but some are more vulnerable:

- **Young horses:** May have erupting teeth, retained baby teeth, or wolf teeth.
- **Older horses:** Often experience tooth loss, loose teeth, and worn-out crowns. Eventually, enough teeth may be lost to make it difficult to chew at all.
- **Sport horses:** Frequently fed concentrates and may have less natural grinding action.
- **Horses with malocclusions:** Misaligned jaws or teeth increase the risk of enamel points and uneven wear.
- **Horses with irregular dental care:** Skipping annual exams allows problems to develop unnoticed.

What are the symptoms?

Dental disease can be subtle, but common signs include:

- Dropping food (“quidding”) or slow eating
- Weight loss or poor condition
- Bad breath
- Head shaking or resistance to the bit
- Nasal discharge (in cases involving tooth root infections)
- Facial swelling or lumps
- Quidding (dropping chewed food)
- Behavioural changes under saddle

Some horses show no obvious signs, which is why regular dental exams are so important.

How is it diagnosed?

A thorough dental exam by a vet or qualified equine dental technician (EDT) is always the best approach.

The process typically includes:

1. **History taking:** Questions about eating habits, behaviour, and general health.
2. **External exam:** Checking the head and jaw for symmetry, lumps, or swelling.
3. **Sedation:** Often used to keep the horse calm and safe.
4. **Mouth rinse and gag placement:** To allow full access and visibility.
5. **Internal exam:** Using a head torch to inspect teeth, gums, and occlusion. Ideally, a camera will be used to inspect the grinding surfaces of each tooth to pick up dental erosion, fissures, and cracks.
6. **Dental charting:** Recording findings and treatment.
7. Advanced cases may require imaging like **X-rays** to assess tooth roots or sinus involvement.

How can it be treated or managed?

Treatment depends on the specific issue but may include:

- **Floating (rasping):** To remove sharp enamel points and restore proper occlusion. This may use powered or manual tools, both have advantages and disadvantages. It is critical however that the teeth are left “rough” on top – a perfectly smooth tooth (caused by over-enthusiastic use of power equipment) means the horse can no longer chew effectively.
- **Extraction:** For damaged or problematic teeth like wolf teeth. This may be carried out standing or even anaesthetised depending on the issue and the surgical approach required.
- **Antibiotics or anti-inflammatories:** For infections or abscesses.
- **Dietary changes:** Switching to softer feeds for horses with missing or painful teeth. Use of soaked “fibre porridge” can allow aged horses with even very advanced dental loss to live a healthy life.
- **Regular monitoring:** Especially for older horses or those with chronic issues.

Most dental treatments are straightforward when caught early. Sedation and proper equipment make the process safe and comfortable for the horse.

Can it be prevented?

Yes. Most dental disease in horses is preventable with proactive care:

- **Annual dental exams:** At minimum, and every 6 months for older or high-risk horses.
- **Feeding sufficient roughage:** Grass and hay promote natural grinding and tooth wear.
- **Monitoring behaviour and eating:** Catching subtle signs early.
- **Using qualified professionals:** Ensure your vet or EDT is properly

trained and registered.

Prevention is far easier (and cheaper) than treating advanced dental disease. Keeping your horse's mouth healthy supports their overall wellbeing, performance, and longevity.

Final tip:

Don't wait for symptoms to appear. Book your horse's dental check-up annually and keep a record of findings and treatments. A healthy mouth means a happy horse!