

Eden Veterinary Practice

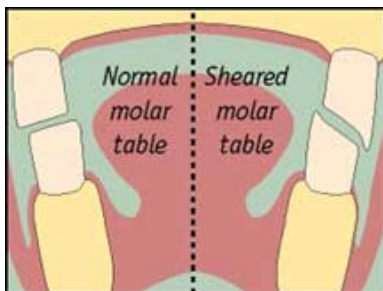
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Autumn 2009 Horse Newsletter
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Teeth and Body Condition



Teeth

It is as important for our equine friends to have regular dental checks as it is for ourselves. In the adult horse, where all of the teeth have erupted, several common problems can develop. Horses naturally chew their food in an elliptical fashion, with the 'grinding' part of the cycle occurring during the sideways movement. In the wild, when chewing forage, the extent of the sideways motion is large, covering the whole of the grinding surface of the teeth, including the edges. In domesticated horses this lateral movement can be reduced, and the horse doesn't tend to grind right to the edges of the teeth every time. The tooth surface therefore gets worn away quicker than the edges, and these become long and sharp. Because of their angled shape, the outside edge becomes sharp on the upper teeth, and the inside edge becomes sharp on the lower teeth. It is these sharp edges that require rasping. Due to the shape of the horse's mouth and the fact it is usually the cheek teeth which are affected it is easier to check the teeth with a gag.



Rasping involves using files to remove abnormally sharp points on the cheek teeth but not enough to make a completely smooth surface. Your horse needs some roughness on the tooth's surface to be able to grind its food. To get to all the different teeth in the mouth a variety of rasps of different angles, shapes and lengths will have to be employed. In most cases removal of sharp enamel edges and points will be all that is required during a routine dental checkup.




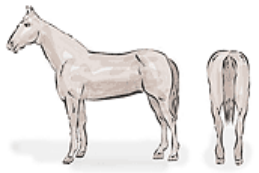
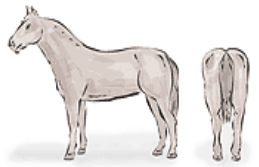
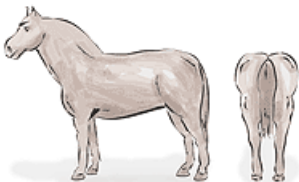
Occasionally, focal overgrowths of certain teeth may need to be addressed: the most commonly encountered type are 'hooks', which usually affect the first upper, and last lower cheek teeth.

A good rule-of-thumb is that the teeth should be examined at least annually but with some problems checks might be undertaken 2 or 3 times a year. Many horse owners combine the annual dental exam with a general health check and the vaccinations given by their veterinary surgeon.

Horses with dental problems can show the following signs. Dropping half chewed food (quidding), increase in time taken to eat hard feed, head shaking while eating, putting hay in his water bucket (some horses will soak the hay to make it easier to chew and swallow), head shaking whilst being ridden and reluctance to work on the bit, behavioural problems, sudden dislike of having a bridle put on, bad breath (halitosis), excessive drooling, nasal discharge (usually caused by infected tooth roots), sores on tongue, lips and/or gums, swellings on the face or lower jaw, tongue sticking out of mouth, weight loss or diarrhoea.

Body condition

At this time of year it is important that your horse is in the correct body condition. To measure body condition we use a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being very thin and 5 being obese. When describing your horse half measurements are allowed if this is more accurate. A horse should be maintained between 2 and 4, allowing for the time of year and what it is used for. (eg. if it's out wintered you should aim for your horse to be condition score 4 in autumn to allow it to lose condition during the winter).

Condition Score	Pelvis	Back and Ribs	Neck	
0 very poor	Angular, skin tight. Very sunken rump. Deep cavity under tail	Skin tight over ribs. Very prominent and sharp backbone	Marked ewe neck. Narrow and slack at base	
1 Poor	Prominent pelvis and croup. Sunken rump but skin supple. Deep cavity under tail.	Ribs easily visible. Prominent backbone with sunken skin on either side.	Ewe neck, narrow and slack tissue.	
2 Moderate	Rump flat either side of back bone. Croup well defined, some fat. Slight cavity under tail	Ribs just visible. Backbone covered but spine felt.	Narrow but firm.	
3 Good	Covered by fat and rounded. No gutter. Pelvis easily felt.	Ribs just covered and easily felt. No gutter along the back. Backbone well covered but spine felt.	No crest (except for stallions) firm neck	
4 Fat	Gutter to root of tail. Pelvis covered by fat. Need firm pressure to feel.	Ribs well covered – need pressure to feel. Slight crest	Wide and firm.	
5 Very fat	Deep gutter to root of tail. Skin distended. Pelvis buried, cannot be felt.	Ribs buried, cannot be felt. Deep gutter along back. Back broad and flat	Marked crest very wide and firm. Fold of fat.	

The main causes of poor body condition are poor teeth, parasitism (worms) and reduced gut function.

However the majority of horses are overweight given that the average condition should be score 3. Being overweight also causes problems for the older horse in that it can make arthritis worse, lead to laminitis, metabolic syndrome, and stress other body systems. Geriatric horses (>20yrs) require careful consideration with respect to their feeding. They require highly digestible energy feed due to the decreased efficiency of their digestive tract, they also tend to have dental problems thus food should be highly palatable and easily chewable and they should have their teeth checked regularly.

To see whether your horse is losing or gaining weight it is a good idea to measure condition score monthly and either use a weigh band or measure tape around your horses chest at the level of the withers.