

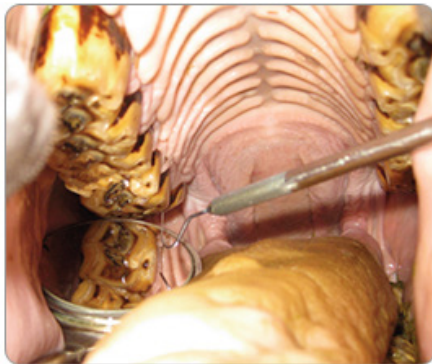
# Common Equine Dentistry Questions

by Dr. Amelie McAndrews

## Why is routine oral care important?

Horses of all ages depend on the ability to chew. If food is not properly chewed, it is not digested efficiently, which can lead to chronic colic, choke, weight loss, and nutritional deficiencies. Regular, preventative, dental care prolongs the life of the horse's teeth (and the horse) by recognizing and treating abnormalities early on, before they become major problems.

Oral problems, such as infections of the teeth roots, gum disease, and oral ulcers from sharp dental points, cause pain and discomfort and can affect athletic performance. A painful horse will not perform to its full potential or have a good quality of life.



*An oral exam in progress. Without sedation, a bright light, and a mirror, we cannot get this view of the horse's mouth to accurately identify problems.*

## Why does my horse need an oral exam?

A comprehensive oral exam should be performed annually by a veterinarian. Only a veterinarian is trained and licensed to perform the exam and any related dental procedures, including floating.

Not all dental problems are obvious to the untrained eye or are revealed through clinical signs. Often there are no obvious signs of disease until the condition is very advanced. Besides sharp dental points, other problems identified during an oral exam include fractured or loose teeth, gum disease, overly long teeth, space between teeth, chewing muscle atrophy, oral cancer, abnormal tooth wear, tooth root or sinus infection, oral foreign bodies (e.g. splinters), and tooth resorption.



*Tooth failure - a fractured tooth.*

## What are the signs of trouble?

Tail or head shaking, fussing with the bit, running backwards, resisting turning or stopping, rearing, bucking, dropping feed (quidding), weight loss, decreased appetite, long stems or whole grains in the manure, nasal discharge, swellings on the head, bad breath, and many other bad behaviors can be dental-related. However, for many oral problems, there are no external signs.

## What is floating?

Horses are born with several inches of extra molar, located mostly in their sinuses and mandible. As they age and wear down their teeth, more molar gradually erupts. This extra supply of molar will eventually wear out at some point in their twenties, for horses that have had regular dental care, and teens, for horses that haven't.

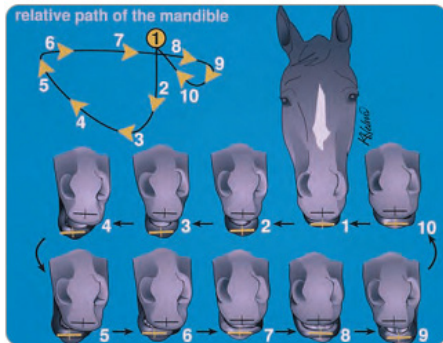


*Horses are born with several inches of reserve molar that gradually erupts as they wear down their molars.*

Horses chew in a figure-of-eight motion and have a narrower lower jaw. This causes them to unevenly wear their molars and form sharp points. These sharp points can ulcerate the horse's cheeks and tongue. Some horses also have less than perfect conformation of their mouths and will form imbalances on the chewing surface of their teeth (sharp hooks, overly long teeth, or wave mouths). Floating teeth is the process of grinding down these sharp points, as well as overly long or unbalanced teeth.

### How do horses in the wild survive without oral care?

Wild horses live on a diet different than our domesticated horses. They consume small meals of rough forage and dirt, which causes them to chew and wear down their teeth differently than the large, infrequent grain and hay meals our horses consume. Horses in the wild do not have the long life expectancy of our horses and don't survive once they can't chew their food.



*Horses chew in a figure-of-eight pattern that causes them to unevenly wear their teeth. Photo credit Easley, Dixon et al, Equine Dentistry, 3rd ed, Saunders. 2011.*

An oral exam and teeth floating are only needed once a year for most horses, though some older horses, or horses with oral problems, may need an oral exam and floating more frequently.

### Does my horse need to be sedated during an oral exam and/or floating?

Sedation, a bright light, an oral speculum, a mirror and probes allow us to perform this exam. Without sedation, we cannot get a good look into your horse's mouth to perform a thorough exam.