

Equine Dental Care: A Guide to Your Horse's Mouth

Unlike humans, horses have **hypsoodont** teeth—meaning they erupt continuously throughout most of their lives. Because horses chew in a wide, circular motion, their teeth often wear unevenly, creating sharp enamel points that can cause significant pain.

Why Dental Maintenance is Critical

Proper dental care isn't just about "straight teeth"; it's about the overall health and longevity of your horse.

- **Digestive Health:** Digestion begins in the mouth. If a horse cannot grind its forage properly, it cannot absorb nutrients, leading to weight loss or colic.
 - **Pain Prevention:** Sharp "points" can slice into the cheeks and tongue, causing ulcers and infections.
 - **Rideability:** A horse in dental pain will fight the bit, toss its head, or refuse to take a lead.
 - **Longevity:** Regular "floating" (filing down sharp points) prevents premature tooth loss and "wave mouths" that can't be fixed later in life.
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Recommended Check-up Frequency

Every horse is an individual, but these general guidelines help maintain a healthy baseline:

Life Stage	Frequency	Reason
Foals/Yearlings	Every 6 months	Checking for alignment and "wolf teeth."
Adults (5–15 yrs)	Annually	Maintaining even wear and removing sharp points.
Seniors (15+ yrs)	Every 6 months	Monitoring for loose, decaying, or missing teeth.

Red Flags: When to Call the Vet Early

Horses are masters at hiding pain. If you notice these signs, don't wait for your annual appointment:

1. **Quidding:** Dropping half-chewed clumps of hay or grass on the ground.
 2. **Packing Food:** Holding "wads" of hay in the cheeks to cushion against sharp teeth.
 3. **Foul Odor:** A bad smell from the mouth or nose often indicates an abscess or infection.
 4. **Nasal Discharge:** Thick discharge from one nostril can be a sign of a tooth root infection in the sinuses.
 5. **Biting Issues:** Uncharacteristic head tossing, leaning on the bit, or resisting bridling.
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Sensitivity Around the Face

It is very common for horses to be "head shy" or picky about being touched near the mouth and ears. While this can be behavioral, it is often a **pain response**.

- **The Vicious Cycle:** If a horse has sharp points, the simple act of you touching their cheek might press the flesh against a "razor" of enamel. They learn that hands near the face equal pain.
 - **Safety First:** If your horse pulls away violently, do not force the issue. Mention this behavior to your vet; they may use mild sedation to perform a safe, thorough exam.
 - **Post-Dental Training:** Once the pain is resolved, use "positive touch" (stroking the forehead or neck) to rebuild trust before moving back toward the muzzle.
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Pro Tip: Always ensure your dental work is performed by a licensed veterinarian or a certified equine dental technician working under veterinary supervision. This ensures the horse can be safely sedated and treated if an extraction is necessary.

