

Equine Dental Care

By Aja Johnson, RAHT



Proper dental care is one of the most important and, unfortunately, overlooked aspects of a well balanced equine health care program.

A horse's dental care regimen should begin shortly after birth. This should involve a general physical exam at which your veterinarian would check the foal for conformational issues such as parrot mouth, which could lead to problems with the horse's bite and jaw alignment as it matures. These issues can be easily managed with routine dental care as long as they have been identified.

Young horses typically get all their deciduous teeth, also known as baby or milk teeth, by the age of 8 months. By 2 years old they begin losing their baby teeth and the permanent teeth begin to emerge. It is very common for the baby teeth to become stuck on top of the emerging adult teeth forming what is known as a cap. These caps can lead to significant problems with your young horse should they not be properly removed. It is recommended that young horses have a dental exam around age 2 ½ to determine if there are caps that need to be removed and

to identify potential dental problems as the adult teeth come in. If a dental exam has not been completed on a young horse, it is highly recommended that one be done before you beginning training.

One case comes to mind of a young mare who had been treated by a non-veterinarian "Equine Dentist" and had received a routine float before commencing with training. The horse initially did well but soon developed issues around her head which lead to rearing and even striking when she experienced pressure from the halter or bridle. The trainer discounted dental issues because the horse had been recently treated and proceeded to implement several different training techniques which only managed to cause the horse to injure herself and lose confidence in those around her.

This horse was presented to our clinic for a thorough exam. Once the horse was sedated, our veterinarian was able to have a good look inside the mouth and discovered the mare had several retained deciduous teeth, 'caps', that had become infected causing abscesses in the jaw bone. The behaviour problems the trainer was experiencing were a response to the pain the horse felt every time she felt pressure on her head. The dental condition was treated and did eventually clear up. Unfortunately the mare's other injuries to her legs and body, sustained while fighting being tied up, and her mental willingness to be trained have not recovered as quickly.

We see scenarios similar to this over and over again, not always as dramatic and not always with disappointing outcomes, however, the common thread is that all could have been prevented with proper dental care.

The type of forage as well as the horse's environment both affect the way the teeth wear. For instance, a horse in a sandy environment will pick up the abrasive

granules in its feed which can cause faster wear of the chewing surfaces. A horse grazing on short pasture or one that cribs or chews wood will wear its incisors faster than one on lush pasture or no pasture at all.

Different types of forage will cause different wear patterns as well. Alfalfa has a much lower silica content than some coarser forages and will not wear the teeth as fast.

There are many health problems associated with dental disease. Sharp points on the molars will cause cheek and tongue sores, known as ulcers, and cause pain while chewing. This can cause problems with digestion and can even lead to issues with chronic weight loss, colic as well as behaviour. Bacteria from infected gums or abscesses can easily enter the blood stream and can cause infection in the heart and other vital organs.

As you can see there are many factors that can contribute to dental problems. Don't wait until your horse is losing weight, dropping feed or having training issues. It is much better, and cheaper, to deal with small problems before they become big ones! 🐾

Editor's note: Aja assures me these same procedures above are just as important to donkeys and minis as to horses. Unfortunately, I can speak to this first hand. I recently was given a mini from a well-meaning horse person. Strawberry, at 16 years old, had never had his teeth looked at until he came to us, although he was used as a driving mini. Forced by the pain of sharp spurs cutting his mouth, he ate by pushing his feed to the front of his mouth, and lost much of it on the ground. He was extremely thin although he had constant access to feed. With the help of CFHA member and nutritionist Mary McNivan (see last issue of our newsletter) and our equine vet, he is slowly putting on weight.

OPINION PIECE

by Gord Fulton

What is it, inbreeding or line breeding? After that statement as a Fjord breeder you may be saying, "Why is that important to me?"

As a breed organization, the CFHA never had a description or ruling on inbreeding. With the limited stallions in the early years, often in the first three generations you will find the same sire twice or even three times. Depending on how you see it, the name for that type of parentage was either inbreeding or line breeding. I don't believe it was bad as the breed came forward with a lot of excellent horses. Plus at the end of the 1800's, one stallion was used as a foundation breeder and all modern Fjords trace back to him.

Now in 2010, the rewriting of the CFHA Constitution made inbred unregistrable, defined as having the same horse twice anywhere in the first three generations. This happened quietly, without any advertising, but it did have the potential to have a massive impact on the registry. The authors of the day and their oversight failed to notice that the wording did not grandfather in any of the existing papers of the registry.

This year at the CFHA Annual General meeting, a motion was put forward to adjust the above problems. The inbreeding definition is still the same but the effective date has been moved to November of 2013 and set, based on a foaling date which grandfathers all existing horses. This allows time for breeders to look at pedigrees and start adjusting breeding as necessary. Also it gives the CFHA time to properly advertise this change to the members.

Now if you are using imported stallions, don't quickly assume, "this doesn't apply to me", only to find that some imported stock are more related than expected. 🐾

