

Equine Oral Exam

UTCVM EQUINE DENTISTRY

The field of equine dentistry has grown exponentially during the past two decades. As a specialty within the profession of veterinary medicine, equine dentistry continues to experience tremendous expansion of knowledge and offers much in the way of equine dental health care, such as improving performance issues, resolving malocclusions (misalignments) and fighting periodontal disease and tooth reabsorption and hypercementosis (EOTRH) syndrome, a serious and painful condition of the front teeth. While most horse owners are familiar with teeth floating to remove sharp enamel points, that procedure alone is insufficient in providing good dental care. A horse's oral cavity should be examined thoroughly to determine what procedures, in addition to floating, are necessary to ensure good dental health. Examination of the equine oral cavity can be performed quickly, easily, and practically in the field or the hospital with minimal stress on the horse and veterinarian. A successful and complete oral exam by a veterinarian should include the following components.



❶ External examination of the head includes

- Looking for lumps, bumps, and any draining tracts that may be associated with dental infection
- Being aware of foul odors from the nose or mouth
- Palpating various structures of the head and note evidence of pain
- Watching the horse eat hay and grain

❷ Evaluation of occlusion (contact areas) of the teeth (hooks, points, wave mouth) includes

- Sedating the horse
- Thoroughly rinsing the mouth of feed particles
- Applying a full-mouth speculum
- Using a good light source to illuminate the oral cavity

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④ Evaluation of the periodontium (tissues surrounding the teeth) includes

- a. Paying close attention to the gum-line and the area between the teeth
- b. Evaluating any abnormal spaces (diastemata) between teeth that may trap feed and predispose the horse to periodontal disease
- c. Evaluating for loose teeth
- d. Often using an oral endoscope to detect abnormalities that might otherwise be overlooked

⑤ Evaluation of the endodontia (dental pulp) includes

- a. Looking for evidence of disease of the interior of the tooth
- b. Detecting cavities (caries), fractures, or damaged pulp cavities

⑥ Evaluation of the oral cavity's soft-tissue includes

- a. Same process as above to evaluate the oral cavity
- b. Focusing on soft-tissues, such as the tongue and cheeks, to detect evidence of trauma that may cause discomfort to the horse



A horse owner should be able to appreciate the subtle signs of dental disease such as abnormal chewing patterns, holding the head to one side, and dropping feed out of the mouth displayed by his or her horse and notify a veterinarian if an issue arises. Otherwise, routine oral examinations are critical to detect problems that may interfere with a horse's oral comfort and chewing cycle. A horse should receive a thorough oral

exam at least once a year regardless of the presence or absence of signs that would indicate dental problems. Horses are prey animals and therefore are excellent at not showing evidence of disease until the condition is well advanced. A problem can often be detected during an oral examination long before the horse exhibits clinical signs therefore saving time and money for the owner and discomfort for the horse.