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Something to chew on: Your horse's dental health

Dr. Wade Hammond

Dear Dr. Weldy's:

What do I need to do to keep up with my quarter horse mare's teeth? Sometimes I think there may be something wrong with the way she chews. I've heard about floating, but what is it?

-Faithful Reader

Dear Reader:

Most basic dentistry arises from the need to reduce or file down sharp points that occur on the outside edges of the upper cheek teeth and the inside edges of the lower cheek teeth. These points form throughout the horse's life because their teeth don't stop erupting when they become an adult. Instead, they have much longer roots than our teeth which continually give rise to more tooth. The horse grinds its feed with a sideways motion, which wears down the surface of the tooth, but not the edges. It is at this edge of the cheek teeth (premolars and molars) that the sharp enamel points form. Constant eruption of new tooth (crown) combined with a side to side grinding action ensures a lifetime of sharp edges that can lacerate the soft tissues of the cheeks and tongue. The process of grinding or filing off the sharp enamel points is commonly referred to as floating.

Proper alignment of the cheek teeth is important as well. If the lower jaw does not line up perfectly with the upper jaw, some part or parts of the teeth will not be ground down at all in the normal process of eating. Over time, this can lead to large hooks which can become long enough to penetrate the hard or soft palate. Uneven wear of permanent premolars and molars can also result in teeth that are too tall in one area of the mouth and physically prevent adequate grinding of the horse's feed. This can lead to dropping of feed from the mouth, head tiding when eating and eventually weight loss.

Obviously, preventing a problem is preferred, but here are a few indicators of dental problems that have gone on too long: loss of feed from the mouth while chewing, loss of body condition, undigested feed particles in the manure, tiding or tossing of the head while chewing, fighting the bit or resisting the bridle, a foul odor from the mouth or nostrils, and nasal discharge with facial swelling.

We recommend an annual oral exam to determine whether routine dental corrections

need to be done. Horses 2 to 5 years of age may require more frequent dental exams than older horses because their teeth are softer and develop the sharp enamel points more than quickly. Also during this age range, 24 teeth will be shed and replaced, with the potential for retained baby teeth that may need to be removed. It is important to maintain a horse's mouth through its middle teens in order to ensure a level grinding surface into its 20's. As horses live longer and longer, consistent dental care deserves much of the credit for the increased life spans we have seen in our equine friends.