

# Dental Problems Can Masquerade as Training Problems

---

Article by John Strassburger, Horse Journal Performance Editor.

## **Your horse's teeth can affect how he feels, behaves and performs.**

**Consider this . . .** When your teeth, gums or cheeks cause you pain from cavities, infections or cold sores, it distracts you from work, recreation or relationships. The pain may even keep you from going to work, school, or even riding. And it can cause headaches, along with pain in your neck, shoulders or back.

The same things happen to your horse, but he can't tell you, so you probably won't let him take the day off because you don't see an obvious cause for his behavior. Watch for subtle signs of discomfort or pain and consider dental care as a possible solution, such as we found with Spock and Fiona.

Spock, a 7-year-old Thoroughbred gelding, worked hard to avoid contact between the bit and the right side of his mouth, but when the two met, you could be sure he'd plant his feet, veer to the left and rear. And if you managed to stay on and get him going forward again, you'd either have 100 pounds of pressure in your right hand or his head constantly would flip like a flamingo sifting water and food through his beak.

Fiona, a 5-year-old warmblood mare, had a less violent reaction when she felt bit pressure for a downward transition. She'd just slam on the brakes, as if she were a reining horse doing a sliding stop. And when she jumped, her efforts were rushed and flat, as if she were in a race to get to the other side.

The power-floating Dr. Grant Miller, of Petaluma, Calif., did on Spock's teeth dramatically changed his attitude toward working into the bridle—really, toward cooperating with his rider at all. He had sharp points on the pre-molars and molars on the right side of his mouth, as well as rostral hooks and caudal ramps, which were inhibiting his ability to chew both his food and accept the bit. (Note: Dr. Grant Miller is now one of Horse Journal's Contributing Veterinary Editors.) See sidebar [equine dentistry has come a long way](#).

Fiona had never had a dental exam, and the work Miller did on her was extensive. In addition to power-floating the sharp hooks on both sides of Fiona's jaw, Miller removed two unusually large wolf teeth from her upper jaw. Quickly, Fiona started to work into the bridle with greater confidence and she began to jump fabulously—like a deer, using her neck and back in a bascule like never before. "It's simple: She felt a lot more comfortable. The bit contacting her wolf teeth was like you banging a metal spoon on one of your incisors," said Miller.

Miller, a graduate of the University of California Veterinary School, practices at the Sonoma-Marín Veterinary Service in Petaluma, Calif. While at veterinary school, he studied extensively under Tony Basile, a master equine dental technician who practices and lectures around the world.

"A dental problem is no different than a lameness," said Miller. "It's going to limit their performance because they're going to spend a lot of time thinking about the pain coming from their mouth and how to avoid it. And that's the biggest reason to give your horse a dental exam annually—to keep the pain or discomfort they're feeling from distracting them from their work."

## **Your horse's teeth can affect how he feels, behaves and performs.**

**Every Nine To 12 Months.** Veterinarians and dental practitioners are frequently baffled as to why such a large percentage of horse owners don't know about equine dental care or don't believe that horses need it. Some horse owners even insist, "Horses don't get dental care in the wild. Why should they need it if they're stabled?"

But they need dental care because stabled horses aren't eating a natural diet, in which rocks and grit do have a mild filing effect. Dental care is just as important as feeding them appropriately, having a farrier trim their hooves, or de-worming them regularly.

Miller has floated the teeth of dozens of horses adopted out of the BLM wild-horse management program. So he knows that "horses in the wild lead dreadful lives. Nature is cruel and unforgiving, and wild horses' teeth are terrible," said Miller. "We can do better than that, and we have to do better if we're riding or training them for our own personal gain."

Even more horse owners (and some "trainers" too) rationalize, "Oh, I had their teeth done last year. They won't need it again for a few years."

Wrong again, says Miller: Horses (especially those in training) need dental work every nine to 12 months. Horses with malformed jaws may need it more often, as may horses from ages 2 to 5—certainly before anyone puts a bit in their mouths.

Horses need their teeth floated because of the way their jaw is built, because of the way they chew, and because their teeth grow continually throughout their lives, unlike humans.

Horses' teeth develop sharp enamel points along the outer edges on their top pre-molars and molars (the edges next to the cheeks) and along the inside edges of the bottom pre-molars and molars (against the tongue), because the rows of lower teeth are closer together than the rows of the upper teeth and because they chew in a sideways or circular motion. The grinding motion has a sharpening effect, creating a jagged point that, if left unattended, will cause ulceration of the cheeks or tongue.

Those points will poke into the cheeks or tongue, causing anything from discomfort to serious pain, especially when the horse tries to chew or tries to turn his head or bend his neck in response to your aids. Points left unfiled for years cause ulcerated skin, rather like having a cold sore that never goes away. "The pain of having their cheeks torn up like hamburger meat has to be a constant source of stress," said Miller.

Those sharp points can also cause digestive problems if they prevent the horse from properly grinding hay, grass and grains. Their gut will then be unable to digest the nutrients, sometimes causing them to lose weight. The undigested matter could even cause colic.

And lack of dental care can also result in periodontal disease, which is painful, expensive and time-consuming to eradicate. See sidebar [Float, Balance and Extract](#).

### **Your horse's teeth can affect how he feels, behaves and performs.**

Read The Signs. If you observe your horse, he or she will tell you if they're in serious need of dental care. For starters, you can examine your horse's mouth. Lightly press your palm against the side of your horse's muzzle; then slide your index and middle fingers along the outside of his upper pre-molars and molars. This will cause the horse to start chewing, so be careful not to get your fingers crushed between the lower and upper jaws. If you feel a prick or a stab on your fingers, you're feeling sharp enamel points.

More extreme indications are discomfort while chewing (sometimes indicated by dropping grain from their mouth), loss of body condition, large or undigested food particles in their manure, nasal discharge or swelling of the face or jaw.

Nasal discharge and swelling are symptoms of periodontal disease or infection, probably of the sinuses, which happens because the long roots of equine teeth extend into the sinuses. Miller said that tooth or sinus infections could require multiple surgeries and years of treatment to eradicate.

A more common indication that your horse needs dental work is his behavior. Does he toss his head up and down when you bridle him or when he feels bit pressure? Does he refuse to bend his head one way or both ways when you ride him? Will he not accept bit contact at all? Does he tilt his head to one side or another, or stick his tongue out? Yes, all of these behaviors could also have other causes, but teeth are an excellent place to start looking. And if teeth are causing these training or behavior issues, it's a relatively easy and relatively inexpensive remedy, usually for between \$100 and \$150.

Plus, dental problems left unattended almost always cause problems elsewhere in the horse—most commonly stiffness and pain in his neck, in his back and in his sacrum. "The horse has to be supple in his body and has to be willing and able to accept your aids to do any sport," said Miller. "So if he's pre-occupied with pain in his mouth, and if that pain has caused him to compensate in other parts of his body and cause pain there, then you really have an issue."

And that's why Miller highly recommends dental care for young horses, especially before you put them to work. The deciduous teeth of youngsters are softer than permanent teeth, so they develop sharp points much more quickly. And since from age 2 to 5, the 24 deciduous teeth are replaced by the 36 to 40 permanent teeth, the sharpening process actually can be accelerated.

Miller often examines foals' teeth, to check for congenital problems and because the sharp points of deciduous teeth can ulcerate the tongue and cheeks. But he more regularly floats the teeth of 2- and 3-year-olds, "because generally they're starting their training, and I want them to be as comfortable as I can make them."

**Bottom Line.** Riders and trainers often encounter 5-, 6- and 7-year-olds who've never (or only once) had their teeth floated, and often they're horses whose previous riders or owners were confounded by their unruly behavior or poor performance.

Miller said that he doesn't understand why some horse owners doubt the importance of dental care. He's confounded by people who lump dental care in with such optional services as massage or psychic communication.

For instance, if a horse can't chew properly, he can develop secondary effects, like tempo-mandibular joint syndrome. Miller noted that the horse's jaw is at the end of his spinal cord, so if his jaw is stiff or unable to move properly, that stiffness or crookedness will usually be transferred down the line. Fixing that will likely require chiropractic or orthopedic work to correct, and it will likely negatively affect muscle development in the neck, back and hindquarters.

"Saying, 'I don't believe in equine dental care' is like saying, 'I don't believe the sky is blue,'" said Miller. "It's a simplistic concept that dentistry is important to avoid very serious training, behavior and health issues."

*Article by John Strassburger, Horse Journal Performance Editor. A graduate A Pony Clubber, John has decades of experience in eventing, steeplechasing and dressage. As editor of The Chronicle of the Horse for 20 years, he covered six Olympics. With his wife, he operates Phoenix Farm, a breeding/training facility in California. John has written two books, "John Strassburger: the Things I Think Matter Most" and "George H. Morris: Because Every Round Counts."*