



WENSUM VALLEY VETS NEWSLETTER

Why do horses get sharp teeth?



Regular dental examinations are recommended at six monthly intervals. At these appointments your horses' teeth are examined and sharp enamel points (SEPs) are removed with a power float to keep your horse comfortable and performing at their best. But why and how do these sharp points form?

Horses diet consists predominantly of fibrous roughage, so their teeth are adapted to grind and break down this tough material. Over time, as horses chew, natural wear leads to the development of sharp edges to the enamel on the outside of the upper teeth and the inside of the lower teeth. The factors below all contribute to this.

Equine tooth structure and eruption

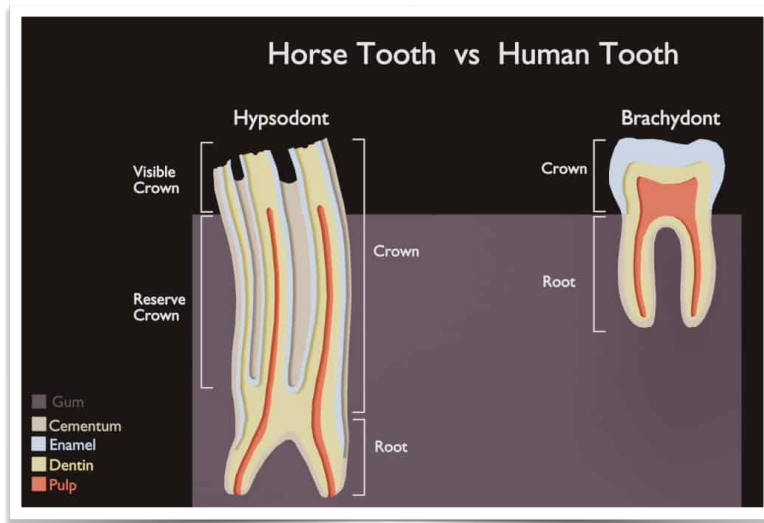
Horses' cheek teeth, which are used for chewing and grinding food, have a "hypsodont" type of tooth structure (diagram below). The cheek teeth consist of premolars (the first few teeth behind the incisors) and molars (located further back in the mouth). Horses have 24 cheek teeth (12 in the upper jaw and 12 in the lower jaw). Soft cementum wears down faster than very hard enamel, creating exposed SEPs.

Horses' cheek teeth continue to grow/erupt from their jaw throughout their lives. This is essential for a grazing animal that needs to break down tough plant material consistently wearing down the grinding surface of the tooth.

Jaw shape, tooth position and chewing action

Horses' jaws have a unique lateral (side-to-side) motion, which grinds their food between the upper and lower cheek teeth. This motion creates an opportunity for uneven wear. Horses' upper jaw is wider than their lower jaw, which also contribute to the formation of SEPs and means that they are usually found on the outside/cheek-side of the upper teeth and the inside/tongue-side of the lower teeth - you might have noticed this on your own horse's dental chart.

Often the first upper cheek tooth (2nd premolar in the diagram below) is set slightly further forward in the



skull than the first lower cheek tooth (its opposing pair). This means that the front of the upper tooth is not worn down and can form a sharp hook over time, interfering with the bit and causing pain. Similarly, the last lower cheek tooth is further back in the mouth than its opposing pair, creating a sharp upward spike called a ramp. Ramps can interfere with chewing and cause painful ulcers at the back of the mouth.

Breed and age factors

As new teeth emerge they may not align perfectly with the teeth in the opposite jaw. This misalignment can cause uneven wear and sharp points to develop more quickly. For young horses, this is particularly true during the eruption of their permanent teeth and loss of their 'caps' which can occur between the ages of 2 and 5 years old. In older horses, similar is true when teeth are lost and no longer have an opposing tooth on the opposite jaw to grind against.

Miniature horse breeds are prone to having overcrowded teeth and malalignment. When teeth are out of line, SEPs will develop faster and can quickly become painful.

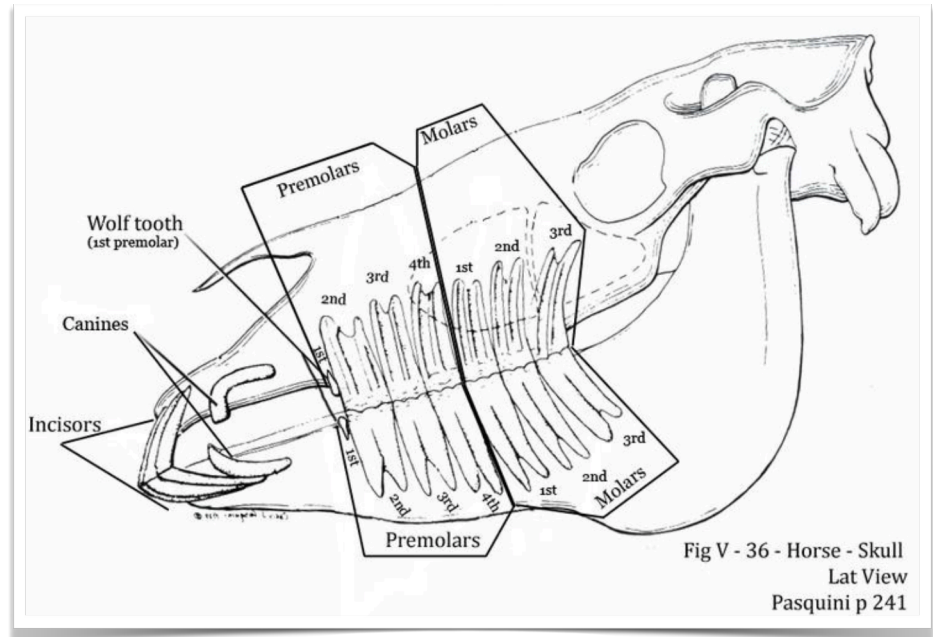


Fig V - 36 - Horse - Skull
Lat View
Pasquini p 241

Why do sharp teeth matter?

Sharp teeth can cause your horse significant discomfort. Points that develop on the upper and lower molars can cut into the sensitive tissue of the horse's cheeks and tongue, causing pain and irritation. Here are some potential issues that can arise from sharp teeth:

Chewing difficulty and weight loss

Horses with sharp points may struggle to chew effectively, leading to issues like dropping food, reduced intake, or difficulty eating certain types of forage. When a horse cannot chew properly due to sharp teeth, it may not be able to get enough nutrients from its food, leading to weight loss or a decline in overall health.

Ridden issues, head tossing or resistance to the bit

Sharp teeth can irritate the soft tissues of the mouth, causing discomfort when the bit is used, leading to behaviour like head tossing, pulling on the reins, or resisting the bit.

Gum irritation, mouth ulcers and pain

Continuous contact with sharp edges can cause sores inside the mouth or along the cheeks, making your horse more sensitive to pressure during riding or while eating. Signs can be very subtle as horses' instincts prevent them from overtly showing dental pain. **Dentistry is an essential part of your horses' care and without regular dental examinations they can be in significant pain.**

We perform over 1000 dental examinations per year in this practice and have specialist equipment for non-routine cases

