

DENTISTRY—

And Your Horse

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The equine mouth can be a scary place

to visit for many horse owners. There are many (42+/-) large teeth, inserted into big jawbones that are connected to strong chewing muscles.

The teeth inside the mouth are not as visible as the hooves, making it difficult for some to remember to properly take care of them. Most equine dentists recommend that a horse have a dental appointment scheduled twice yearly. This does not matter the type of work he does or his size.

The equine wider upper jaw is fixed with the narrower lower jaw doing the work of grinding in a circular pattern, leading to sharp edges on the teeth over time. When the outside edges of the molars become sharp, sometimes horses will pack food between the teeth and the cheeks to help protect the sensitive skin from forming ulcers. The tongue is less likely to become injured by the inside tooth sharpness because it can move out of the way, more often than not.

Horses' teeth are quite long and only a small portion is seen above the gum line; about 1/8th of an inch of each tooth erupts per year. The dentist has to be careful not to remove too much of the edges and rarely the surface of a tooth to maintain a properly functioning mouth. There are two options for tackling this job, rotary (motorized) or manual floats (files).

Rotary tools are very useful in specific instances, such as in an older horse whose teeth may be loose, though not ready to be removed. In this instance a manual float may require too much motion to maintain comfort for your horse.

There are natural formations in an equine mouth that can cause big problems if they are not properly cared for and corrected on a regular basis. They are created by uneven lengths of tooth drastically affecting the way a horse eats and behaves. The sharpness of teeth, hooks, ramps, waves (Figure 1) and stepped molars (Figure 2) are only a few examples of what happens in a horse's mouth; many more can occur through genetics, natural wear and injury.

There is a dental adage,
"The mechanics of the horse follows his nose".

Here are three examples of what begins in the mouth and how it manifests in the body.

Because of an improper use of rotary tools for more than 10 years, a 21 year old gelding experienced ramps in his mouth, (Figure 3). They caused the molars to not meet correctly in his mouth, resulting in weight and nutrition loss,

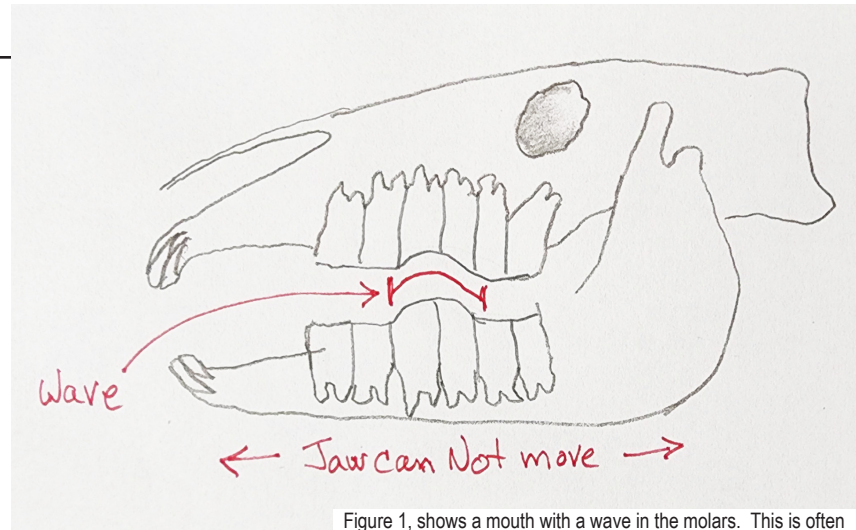


Figure 1, shows a mouth with a wave in the molars. This is often created by a dentist, though it can happen because of an injury.

with muscle weakness leading to uneven mobility. Using manual tools, his current dentist is making progress in correcting and eliminating the ramps. This is a slow process by the limitation of the small amount of new tooth presented annually. Over time, he was able to eat more correctly. He began gaining weight, benefiting from better nutrition his muscle structure strengthened, relieving tension through his body, with less discomfort throughout his body.

An eleven year old OTTB gelding demonstrated signs of discomfort before the end of his six month cycle between dental visits. It was determined this was due to the development of a hook on an upper and a lower molar on the left side of his mouth. Because of this problem his teeth did not wear evenly. He will began having his dental checks at five months hoping to eliminate his dental discomfort. The goal was for him to gain enough balance in his musculature that he will last the six month cycle with less pain and possibly without the hooks returning. (Figure 4)

Huge hooks on the pre-molars of the upper jaw and the last molars of the lower jaw, caused a 9 year old OTTB mare to become difficult to handle and impossible to ride, in spite of many other approaches to correct her behaviors. These hooks greatly limited the movement of her jaws from side to side, and the ability of opening her mouth fully was reduced. The mobility of her lower jaw sliding forward when her head was perpendicular was lessened. Once the hooks were properly addressed, she became a loving, rideable and an affectionate chestnut mare.

Muscle atrophy in the neck, shoulders and back create an imbalance in the horse's body because the horse is not able to move his head correctly, creating the hooks between dental visits.

Equine Dentistry is a maintenance of your horse's mouth allowing it to function properly. With a well-balanced mouth your horse continues to absorb nutrition from properly chewed food and lessens potential physical problems.

This article is a very rudimentary introduction to equine dentistry. If your horse is experiencing behavioral, eating or structural problems, consider having a well-trained, equine dentist check their teeth for any potential problems inside his mouth. It is all too easy to blame poor training, nutrition or manners, when the solution could simply be in your horse's mouth.

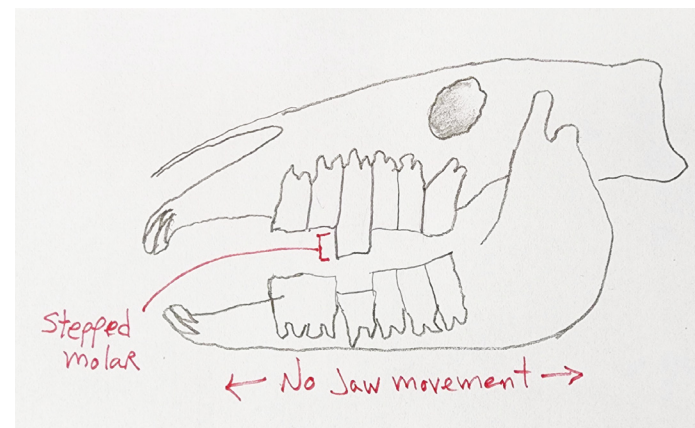


Figure 2, shows a mouth with stepped molars. This occurs when the opposing tooth is broken or missing.

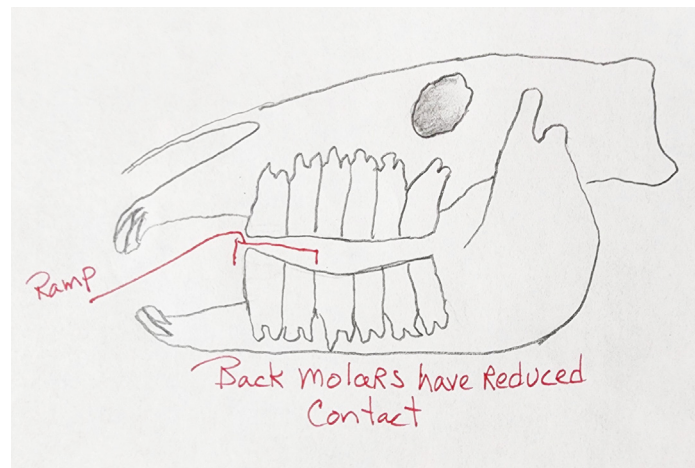


Figure 3, shows a ramp on the lower molars.

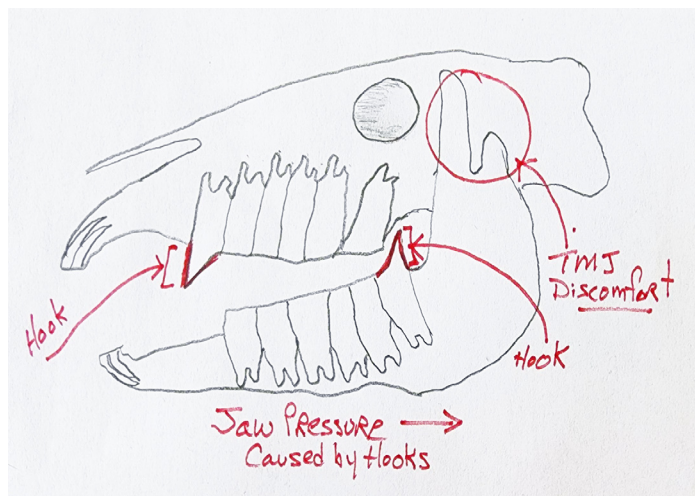


Figure 4, shows an upper hook on a pre-molar and a hook on the back of the last molar on the bottom.

Equine Dentist Judith Cockey based in St. Michaels, MD advised and provided information to me for this article.

For more information about Trish's work and clinics educating people how to improve their horse's posture and mobility, please visit www.HechterEquineMobility.com.

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