

Saddle Up

Wolf teeth more than a bit annoying

By Amanda Winstanley

One subject that pops up regularly in equine dentistry is wolf teeth in our equine friends.

What are wolf teeth?

Millions of years ago, when horses were much smaller animals, the wolf tooth used to be a full sized large grinding cheek tooth. Hence they are still labeled today as the first premolar in the cheek teeth arcades.

However, with evolution changing the horse as we now know it, wolf teeth have become redundant, having no real function in the modern horses mouth.

Not all horses have wolf teeth, but if they do, they tend to erupt between the ages of six and 18 months old.

They can come in all shapes and sizes, and whilst I have seen a few freak large ones (bigger than the old five-cent piece) they mostly are quite tiny, half the size of small fingernail.

Where are they found?

Their location can cause confusion for some horse owners. They are frequently muddled with the male canine teeth that erupt around the ages of four-and-a-half to five years.

These are the fighting teeth in the males and lie in the diastema, or space, between the incisors, at the front of the mouth and the large premolars.

Canines are easily visible when viewing the horse's mouth in profile, whereas wolf teeth tend to be situated further back beside the big premolar teeth.

Whilst they can appear in all four arcades they are more commonly found in the upper arcades. Strictly speaking, as they are regarded as a premolar tooth they can be deciduous, meaning that they can have a baby set of wolf teeth which are replaced when others are extracted or shed.

Personally I have not witnessed this. What is more common is that when extracting the wolf teeth it can be easy to break the root off under the gumline, so not all of the tooth is extracted.

Usually within six months any loose root fragment will rise to the surface of the gum facilitating further extraction. Not be confused with a deciduous tooth.

Why are they a problem?

The problem with wolf teeth is due to their location and the fact that we have domesticated our horses so that we like to ride them, drive them and/or show them with bits in their mouths.

When contact is taken up on the reins the bit will connect with any wolf teeth present in a horses mouth.

Generally wolf teeth are shallow rooted, so any pressure or contact around them will create a slight movement which in turn will annoy and irritate the horse.

Typical signs of a horse suffering with wolf teeth is that they flick/tilt their heads when being ridden and there will be some resistance to rein contact.

Of course this can be exacerbated when the horse may only have a wolf tooth on one side, creating a definite one sided resistance.

Some horses have 'blind' wolf teeth. This terminology refers to a tooth that simply has not erupted into the oral cavity but can be felt easily through the gum tissue. It creates the same problem as a fully erupted wolf tooth.

The solution:

The solution is simple. All certified equine dentists recommend these teeth are extracted ideally prior to horses being bridled and/or started for the first time to avoid any early bad feelings associated with being ridden.

The procedure will involve your vet administering a small amount of pain relief intravenously to your horse, in the form of sedation.

Once the horse is suitably relaxed (usually after 4-5 minutes) the dentist can carry out the extraction procedure.

It is advisable that your horse has some form of pain relief making it a more pleasant experience for horse, owner and equine dentist.

Amanda Winstanley is your local Certified Equine Dentist. Phone 411 8827, 021 425 591.

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Certified equine dentist: Amanda Winstanley can solve the problem of wolf teeth.



Small wolf tooth: The first premolar in the cheek teeth arcades.



Very large wolf tooth: Tend to be situated further back beside the big premolars.