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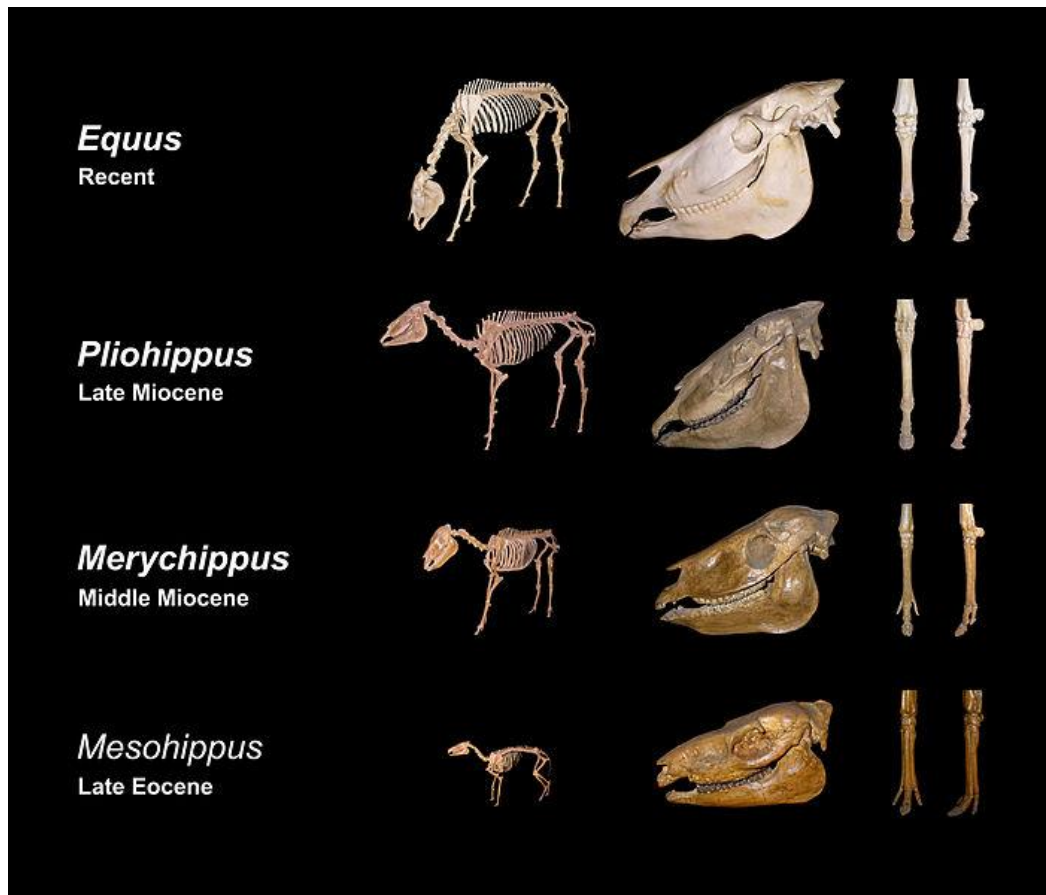
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An apple a day keeps the dentist away!

They say 'no foot horse', but the same can apply to 'no mouth no horse'. Dental care for your horse is a rapidly growing industry and a vital part of the routine health care for your horse. This is the first of a series of articles that will hopefully cover why dental examinations are required, the normal anatomy of the horses mouth and tooth structure, common dental problems, and more serious systemic problems evolving from dental issues.

The equidae family evolved 50-70 million years ago. As the diet has changed the gastro intestinal tract has evolved to ensure that the consumption of digesta can be consumed and digested to provide adequate nutrition.



The first part of this GI system is the teeth. Adult horses will have between 36-44 teeth that have evolved over millions of years to be able to last chewing up to 60 times a minute for 14-20 hours a day.

Healthy teeth are vital to a horse being able to receive adequate nutrition.

POOR CHEWING=POOR NUTRITION

Horses are grazing animals and they depend upon their teeth for gathering food into their mouths (prehension) and chewing and grinding up the food for optimum nutrition (mastication).

Diet, pasture management and stabling all impact on dental wear. Horses are designed to graze for 2/3 of the day, but they are now fed 'abnormal' diets, with increased grains and hay, with access allowed for short intervals only, often with an abnormal head position (hay nets and feed racks). These all alter the chewing pattern and the way that the teeth are worn over time.

Without regular dental checks, there are a wide variety of dental problems that can lead to other health issues with your horse. Dental issues can include acquired conditions (peridontitis), congenital deformities (parrot mouth), eruption abnormalities (dentigerous cysts), age related problems (caps, wolf

teeth eruption, periodontal disease, loose teeth, crowns worn away), wear disorders, direct trauma, tumours and problems due to escalation of simple and routine changes that become serious problems (hooks, points, mouth ulcers, periodontitis, fractures).

No matter what the problem, they can all cause pain, constant irritation, leading to decreased food intake, leading to poor nutrition and weight loss. A host of further problems can develop including behavioural and biting problems, poor performance, temporomandibular joint pain, sinus infections, choke and colic.

The constant grinding and chewing done by the premolars and molars (cheek teeth) breakdown the foodstuff into smaller particles. This increases the surface area available for the digestive enzymes to work on. The chewing also increases saliva production. The saliva itself contains digestive enzymes and bicarbonate to help buffer the stomach acid. This is a vital stage of digestion required to gain adequate nutritional value from the foodstuff.

Up to 80-90% of feed is converted into energy. Energy is required for body maintenance, performance, growth and reproduction.

The most common sign of a dental problem isNOTHING!!!

Horses have a high pain threshold and it is not until problems are serious that owners may notice that something is wrong, so regular dental checks are vital.

Signs that may occur include:

Quidding

Excess salivation when eating

Eating slowly

Dropping feed

Weight loss/failure to gain weight

Head tilt/head tossing

Biting problems

Behavioural problems

Head shy

Choke

Colic

Facial swelling

Nasal discharge

Halitosis

When should you start having your horse's mouth checked?

At birth!!

Your vet will be able to notify you of any birth defects, e.g. parrot mouth or wry mouth. Your horse's mouth should then be examined every six months from a yearling to 5 years of age.

Why so often??

ALOT is going on during this time! Up to 44 permanent teeth are erupting, between 1.5 and 4.5 years of age, plus the caps are being shed from 2.5 to 4.5 years of age. The shedding of caps can cause discomfort and malocclusion of the

erupting permanent teeth by pushing them out of place. The new young adult teeth are initially quite soft, so hooks and points develop quickly and easily. As long as there are no on going problems, a yearly check will then be sufficient, up until the horse develops an 'old' mouth. Bi annual checks should then be resumed.

In summary, the old saying 'no foot no horse' definately also applies to 'no mouth no horse'. Preventative dental care is vital to minimize the abovementioned issues, resulting in a happier, healthier equine companion.