

## Equine Dentistry: What Could Be Wrong With My Horse's Mouth?

By Bruce Whittle, DVM

**The Incisors** – 12 deciduous (baby) teeth then 12 permanent teeth in the front of the horse's mouth

**Ventral curvature (smile):** the chewing surface of the incisors is curved so that the top central incisors are longer than the teeth on either side of them. This condition may prevent good contact of the cheek teeth when the horse is trying to chew grass or hay.



**Dorsal curvature (frown):** the chewing surface of the incisors is curved so that the bottom central incisors are longer than the teeth on either side of them. Similar to the smile configuration, this condition may prevent good contact of the cheek teeth when chewing.



**Incisor diagonal (slant):** the chewing surface of the incisors is slanted from side to side. Horses with this condition require a very comprehensive oral examination because the slant may have developed due to asymmetry of the top or bottom jaws and attempts at leveling the incisors may actually be harmful to the horse.



**Supernumerary tooth:** this term simply means there are too many teeth in a given arcade – in this case there are seven lower incisors instead of the normal six.



**Oligodontia:** this term means there are fewer than normal teeth in a given arcade – in this case there are only five upper incisors instead of six. This has led to a couple of the lower teeth getting taller due to abnormal wear.

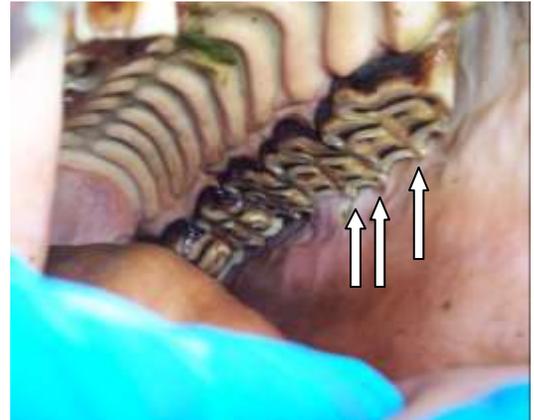


**Fractured tooth:** Just like it sounds, this term refers to a tooth that is broken or split. If the fracture line goes through the pulp of the tooth, this can be a very serious situation, requiring root canal therapy or possibly extraction.



**The Cheek Teeth** – these are the 24 (in a normal horse) teeth toward the back of a horse’s mouth which are placed into 4 rows of six teeth each. These teeth are normally packed tightly together and act as a single functional grinding surface.

**Sharp Enamel Points:** these sharp projections typically form on the outside of the upper cheek teeth (affecting the cheek) and the inside of the lower cheek teeth (affecting the tongue). They can cause lacerations to the cheek or tongue and are the most common indication for floating a horse’s teeth.



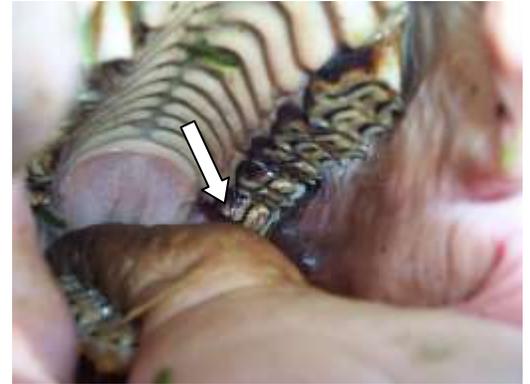
**Hook:** this term refers to a dental overgrowth, typically on the front upper cheek tooth or back lower cheek tooth. A hook is usually taller than it is wide. It can interfere with front-to-back movement of the lower jaw and can cause pain to the horse when ridden with a bit in its mouth.



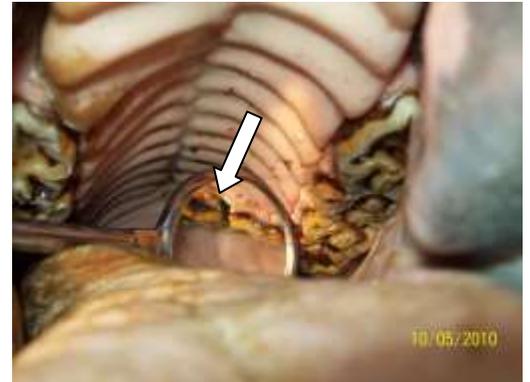
**Ramp:** a dental overgrowth on either end of a dental arcade that is wider than it is tall. This overgrowth is very similar to a hook and sometimes it is difficult to determine to which category a given overgrown tooth belongs.



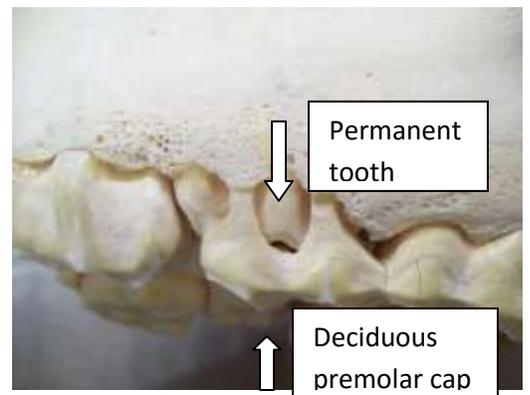
**Step:** a dental overgrowth in which one tooth or most of a tooth is taller than the adjacent teeth. This pathology may cause problems with front-to-back movement of the lower jaw.



**Diastema:** this term refers to an abnormal gap between two teeth. This is problematic because feed material can pack into the space and rot and this can lead to periodontal disease. A complete diagnosis may require radiographs. A diastema is often not easily seen without an intraoral mirror.



**Premolar Cap:** A cap is a deciduous or baby tooth that has not shed. Caps should only be extracted if they are ready to be removed, otherwise, damage to the underlying permanent tooth can occur. A thorough oral examination should be performed before a cap is extracted.

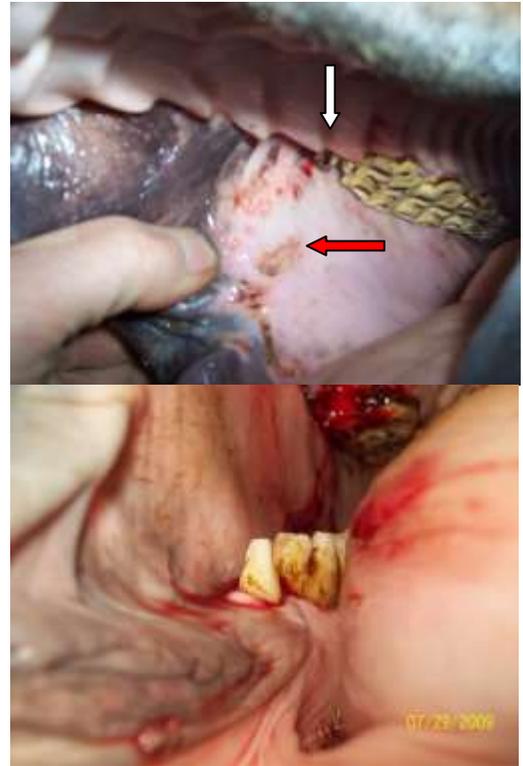


**Wave Mouth:** This is a condition in which multiple overgrowths and corresponding excessive wear on the opposing arcade occurs. A wave should not be automatically leveled as this will take teeth out of contact and not allow the horse to properly chew its food.



**Wolf teeth and Canine teeth: The Other White Teeth!** Although not needed by the horse for chewing functions, these teeth are often present and need to be considered during the dental care of a horse.

**Wolf Teeth:** the name given to the vestigial first premolar which is not present in all horses. It is typically located just in front of the first cheek tooth but can be located further forward. This tooth (white arrow) can cause problems with the bit and may cause lacerations of the cheek (red arrow). Wolf teeth are commonly extracted but this decision should be based on an oral examination to determine likelihood of problems. The lower wolf tooth in the picture to the right is large and prominent and will likely cause problems with the bit and was extracted in this case.



**Canine Tooth:** This tooth, not to be confused with the wolf tooth, despite the similar name, is found closer to the incisors than the cheek teeth. They are more common in male horses. In the past, canine teeth were aggressively reduced in height but now we know this can harm the tooth.



Diagnosis and treatment of these conditions constitutes the practice of veterinary medicine. Recognition of these conditions should prompt a horse owner to consult with their veterinarian. Oral care is an important part of an overall preventative health program and each horse should have an oral examination performed on an annual basis to assess the need for any treatments.

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