

# What to Consider Before Tooth Removal in Horses (AAEP 2012)

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Updated: Monday, April 1, 2013 8:00 AM

Posted: Monday, April 1, 2013 7:41 AM

Originally published on [TheHorse.com](#)

The goal of equine dentistry is to preserve teeth whenever possible, but sometimes that broken or rotten tooth just has to go before it causes more problems such as infection of the sinuses or jawbone. However, before deciding to extract a horse's tooth, owners and veterinarians must consider a number of important factors, noted a Cornell University researcher in a recent presentation to practitioners.

The overall goal of extraction should be to "keep the horse comfortable and functional," noted Jennifer Rawlinson, DVM, Dipl. AVDC, in her session at the 2012 American Association of Equine Practitioners convention, held Dec. 1-5 in Anaheim, Calif., But first she explained that the extraction should serve one or more of the following purposes:

- To help the horse achieve optimal mastication (chewing);
- To enable the horse to maintain a healthy weight;
- To support the horse's performance;
- To prevent oral pain and pathology (tissue damage); or
- To treat oral pain and pathology.

Rawlinson said veterinarians must also consider tooth anatomy and any existing pathology involving the tooth or surrounding tissues, such as externally visible fractures, enamel decay, tooth erosion, or gingival disease.

However, she said, most horses with dental pathology exhibit no obvious, outward signs. This emphasizes the importance of performing regular, comprehensive oral examinations using sedation, a full-mouth speculum, and a good light source, she said.

Because dental disease sufficient to cause weight loss is usually quite severe, Rawlinson recommended that veterinarians complete a full physical examination on any horse that presents with weight loss for suspected dental pathology, along with running blood work. While the horse might indeed require dental work, Rawlinson cautioned against hurrying to address the teeth because it could mean missing any medical causes of weight loss.

After detecting a dental abnormality with oral examination and radiographs (X rays), the veterinarian and horse owner still must take into account several factors before moving ahead with a tooth extraction. For instance, the horse's age and overall physical condition are important considerations, as he will need to be able to stand under sedation and endure a potentially lengthy extraction process. Also, the veterinarian should consider his or her own skill, equipment, schedule, and facilities; if he or she does not have the proper training, sufficient time, or adequate preparation to handle potential complications, the case should be referred.

Finally, the owner must be prepared mentally, emotionally, and financially, not only for the procedure itself but also for the aftercare and lifelong dental maintenance the horse will require.

Disclaimer: Seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian before proceeding with any diagnosis, treatment, or therapy.