

J Frame MRCVS
N W Frame BVM&S, Cert EP, Cert VA, MRCVS
C D Swift MA, VetMB, Cert CHP, MRCVS
M W Colston BVM&S, Cert SHP, MRCVS
R G Anderton MA, VetMB, MRCVS
J T Gillon BVM&S, Cert SAM, MRCVS
S D Galloway BVM&S, Cert EP MRCVS

Frame, Swift & Partners
The Veterinary Centre



The Veterinary Centre
Carleton
Penrith
Cumbria, CA11 8TZ

Tel : 01768 862454
Fax : 01768 867163

It's the time of year when your horse or pony is probably spending at least some time in the stable in order to give either your field a rest from damaging hooves, or your animal a rest from damaging weather! This time inside can be a useful opportunity to have a look at how your horse is eating. Loss of appetite is obvious and can be a sign of a huge number of conditions, but subtle changes in the manner or speed in which your horse eats can be often only be seen if specifically looked for and are frequently signs of dental problems.

The most easily noticed sign is dropped food on the stable floor underneath the haynet. This is known as "quidding". It may be obvious to see, but some horses will eat the dropped food from the stable floor once it has softened with the saliva it is mixed with so checking halfway through your horses "meal" may reveal balls of half-chewed food. Other signs that are usually significant but are easily missed include appearing to roll the food around the mouth before swallowing, chewing on only one side of the mouth, balling food in the cheeks and sometimes halitosis.

Veterinary understanding of equine dental disease is expanding very rapidly. The range of disorders that we both diagnose and treat is growing on a yearly basis. Dental extractions can now often be carried out under standing sedation whereas 10-15 years ago the vast majority were done under full anaesthetic. Thankfully the need for extractions is still relatively small but reasons include abscessation of the tooth root/apex, dental displacements and dental fractures. A gap between the teeth, "diastema", is an increasingly commonly diagnosed disorder and can be extremely painful. It results in food becoming wedged into the space between the teeth leading to gum infection. There are several treatments for diastema ranging from simple dietary management to widening of the gap with a special motorised burr.

Although it is vital your horse has a full oral examination if there are any signs of dental disease, in an ideal scenario the problem would be prevented through regular routine inspections before the disease developed. By the time signs are shown in many cases the abnormality is worryingly advanced. It never ceases to amaze me how stoical some horses and ponies are when they are seen to eat with almost no outward signs of pain while having deep ulcers in their mouths caused by overgrown teeth. Regular checks and rasping (or "floating") of the teeth will keep oral pain from sharp teeth at bay and will aid the early detection of other problems. Not all horses seem to appreciate the benefits of a full dental examination (perhaps like some of us and the dentist!) and in these cases we use sedation to minimise the stress levels involved.

Winter is also the perfect time to check your horse's weight. It is far easier to lose some weight via dietary changes in the winter than during the summer turn out months when grass is abundant. The weigh bridge has been in regular use over the last month and it is remarkable how rapidly weights can change even though to the eye the animal remains the same. Seeing in black and white that precisely 26.7kg has been lost is very encouraging when persisting with your horse's diet!