Feed and management tips for horses with dental issues | Spillers Feeds
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Feed and management tips for horses with dental issues



Dental issues are one of the more well-known signs of aging and include lost or worn teeth, diastemas (gaps between the teeth), inflamed gums and even arthritis of the jaw. Difficulty chewing can lead to weight loss as well as digestive issues, and although more common in senior horses, can occur in younger horses too. Regardless of your horse’s age, it pays to have their teeth checked regularly and make sure you can spot the signs of a potential problem.

Time for a check-up?

All horses should have their teeth checked regularly by a vet or equine dental technician, but older horses may need more frequent attention. Between visits, look out for signs of pain or difficult chewing including:

- Weight loss
- Quidding
- Digestive issues such as colic, choke, loose droppings
- Reluctance or refusal to eat
- Bad breath
- Obvious pain or discomfort when eating or always chewing on one side
- Facial swellings
- Long fibre, whole cereal grains or partially/ undigested feed in droppings
- Reluctance to accept the bit and/ or changes in ridden behaviour

Senior horses may have sensitive teeth!

If you suffer from sensitive teeth the last thing you want to do is tuck into an ice-cream! Sensitive teeth can make older horses reluctant to drink, increasing their risk of dehydration and colic. Try adding hot water to buckets to take the chill off and using warm water to soak cubes and mashes.

Soaked feeds

Most cubes or pellets can be soaked to make a mash but quick-soaking feeds such as SPILLERS Senior Super-Mash may be a more convenient option. Regardless of the feed you choose, remember to weigh it before soaking – the increase in volume after soaking can make it easy to over-estimate how much you are feeding! Avoid soaking feeds in advance, especially in hot weather when they can start to ferment quite quickly (quick soaking varieties are ideal in this situation). If you choose a mash that requires a longer soaking time, keep it covered and in warm weather, try to leave it in a cool dark place.

Choosing a hay/ forage replacer

Forage replacers are essential for horses no longer able to manage long fibre (hay, haylage and grass) but with a variety of cubes, short chopped fibres (chaffs) and mashes to choose from, it can be difficult to know where to start. The most suitable option(s) will depend on several factors including your horse’s energy (calorie) requirements, chewing ability, history of clinical conditions such as laminitis and what they find palatable.

- For those who can manage them, soft, short chopped fibres are the ideal way to

increase chewing, helping to support gastric health and mental well-being. However, horses and ponies with very poor teeth will need 100% of their diet replaced with a mash.

- Avoid grass-based products for laminitics as they may be high in water soluble carbohydrates (WSC)

- All feeds for laminitics should be low in starch and sugar

- Check whether your chosen hay replacer(s) contain added vitamins and minerals – a nutrition advisor can offer advice on providing a balanced diet without over-supplying vitamins and minerals

- Some feeds such as SPILLERS HAPPY HOOF, SPILLERS HAPPY HOOF Molasses Free, SPILLERS High Fibre Cubes, SPILLERS Speedy-Mash Fibre and SPILLERS Senior Super-Mash are suitable for feeding as complete replacement for hay or grazing, while others such as alfalfa and unmolassed sugar beet are only suitable for feeding as partial hay replacers

Feeding a hay replacer

Hay replacers should be divided into a minimum of 4 meals for horses without access to grazing to avoid long periods fibre and for those who can manage it, chewing. Some horses will learn to regulate to their intake but small frequent meals and dividing rations between multiple buckets may help to encourage ‘grazing’. Those with turnout may also need to be separated from their companions at mealtimes to prevent ‘sharing’ or bullying.

For more advice on feeding horses with dental issues contact the SPILLERS Care-Line.

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