

WOLF TEETH

WHAT ARE THEY AND SHOULD THEY BE REMOVED ?

by Angela Walsh BVMS MRCVS

The wolf teeth are properly named the 'first premolar' and are found in front of the start of the row of the cheek teeth (molars and premolars); in the picture below they are arrowed in red. They are found in approximately 70% of horses. They are termed 'vestigial' which

Should they be removed?

This is a decision for you to make with your veterinary surgeon, it is thought that many wolf teeth cause no problems but reasons for removing teeth would be the following;

- If they are positioned quite separate from the first cheek tooth
- If they are unstable or wobbly
- If the horse seems to be sore when pressed in the region around the tooth, or the gum overlying a blind wolf tooth.
- If the tooth is in the bottom jaw (may be more likely to interfere with the bit.)
- If there are schooling issues that cannot be explained by anything else
- If however the tooth is large/ close to the cheek teeth / causing no pain and the horse is working well it is fine to leave them well alone.



Various extracted wolf teeth. Photo by kind permission of Kieran O'Brien MRCVS

This procedure can take a couple of minutes or in difficult cases around half an hour per tooth. We aim to remove the whole tooth but occasionally the root can fracture and may need to be removed at a later date if causing problems.

Who is allowed to remove wolf teeth?

Removal of wolf teeth is deemed by The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons a 'Category 2 Procedure' and therefore is only meant to be done by suitably qualified persons, these are;

Veterinary Surgeons who are allowed to remove any type of tooth including wolf teeth, displaced, erupted or blind

Equine dental technicians must firstly pass an examination approved by DEFRA and then are only allowed to remove "erupted and non-displaced wolf teeth under direct and continuous veterinary supervision", therefore removing these without a vet present is not allowed. To read more about who is allowed to do what in relation to equine dentistry please see https://www.beva.org.uk/_uploads/documents/1equine-dental-procedures-no-date.pdf

■ **Angela Walsh MRCVS runs an equine clinic in Warwickshire with her husband Robert and four other vets. She is studying for advanced practitioner status with Liverpool Vet School in her spare time as well as looking after her two sport mad boys and the clinic's flock of sheep!**

■ **To find out more see www.cornerhousevets.com**



An equine dental chart with molars and wolf teeth highlighted

means they have no function anymore although in our horse's prehistoric ancestors it is thought that these teeth helped with their diet of bushes and shrubs. Wolf teeth erupt between 5 and 12 months of age and are normally found in the top jaw although less often they may be present in the bottom jaw too. They can be found equally in males or females. People often confuse them with the canine tooth (or tush), which occur mainly in males and don't appear until 5-6 years of age. These are arrowed blue in the picture and are found further forward in the jaw, they seldom cause problems.

Different appearances of wolf teeth just to confuse owners.....!

Wolf teeth can be 'blind' which means they haven't erupted, these are often just felt as a bump in the gum over the region where one would expect to find the tooth. They can also erupt in strange places out of line with the other cheek teeth (such as in our second photo) where the tooth has erupted closer to the hard palate. As mentioned before sometimes they can appear in the bottom jaw.



How are they removed?

Wolf teeth should be removed under sedation (which incorporates an analgesic or painkiller) and more often now vets are also using local anaesthetic to make the procedure pain and trouble free. The mouth is cleaned and flushed then an elevator is used to cut the gum around the tooth and loosen the periodontal ligament which holds the tooth in place. The tooth is then grasped and removed with forceps.

Blind wolf teeth and fractured wolf teeth may need to be x-rayed to aid removal. The earlier the tooth is removed (ie at a year) the easier the procedure should be as long as the horse is well handled. We always check that the horse's tetanus vaccinations are up to date as mouth wounds are a prime environment for tetanus bacteria to grow.

We sometimes give pain relief for a few days and find that the area normally heals with no problem in 7-10 days.