

Wolf Teeth

What are Wolf Teeth?

Wolf Teeth are the small teeth that are found just in front of the first of the cheek teeth. They are in fact the remnants of teeth that evolution has largely done away with in the horse. When we look at the teeth in the horse, there are Incisor teeth (the ones at the front that you see when the lips are parted), behind those are the Canine (K9) teeth (which are mainly restricted to male horses) and then the cheek teeth.

We classify the cheek teeth as either Pre-Molars or Molars. There is very little physical difference between a premolar and a molar, the main difference being that the Pre-Molar teeth have a deciduous precursor or a baby-tooth. There are six cheek teeth in each row, with four rows in total. In each row of six cheek teeth the front three are Pre-Molars and the back three are Molars. This means that a foal only has Three Cheek teeth, which are the deciduous versions of the Pre-Molars these are shed as "caps" between 2 and 4 years of age. Wolf teeth are the remnants of a 1st Pre-Molar which makes the Pre-Molars we see in the horse actually the second, third and fourth pre-molars.

Wolf teeth can erupt from 5-6 months of age onwards. There are no deciduous pre-cursors (Baby teeth) for Wolf Teeth. They are very variable in size, shape, amount of root, position, and do not occur in every horse. They can occur in both upper and lower jaws but are far more common in the upper jaw.

Why do we remove Wolf Teeth?

Wolf Teeth get a lot of bad press, not all of it justified. Because of their position to the rear of the "Bars" of the mouth, they can potentially cause problems with the bit. Not every Wolf Tooth has to be removed, as a general guide any of the following criteria would justify the removal of a Wolf Tooth:

- Positioned separate from the first Cheek tooth
- Small and Sharp
- Unstable / wobbly
- Consistent pain response from horse when finger pressure applied on or around wolf tooth
- Wolf Tooth on one side only (especially if rider reports worse on one rein)
- Owner wants the Wolf Tooth removed

Wolf teeth can be left in place if:

- Horse not showing any abnormal signs
- Wolf Tooth closely situated next to the 1st cheek tooth
- No sharp or rough edges on Wolf Tooth
- It is large, or is stable to finger pressure
- Owner doesn't want it removed

How do we remove Wolf Teeth?

All horses are different and so are most Wolf Teeth. Some horses just require a little topical local Anaesthetic, others require sedation. Almost all wolf teeth can be removed without having to resort to general anaesthesia. The Vet will decide how to proceed by evaluating the type, size, position etc of the Wolf tooth and the temperament of the horse.

Some wolf teeth fail to erupt through the gum and these are sometimes called "Blind". these can be very problematic and painful. If it is not clear what is lying under the gum, an X-ray can help show the orientation of the tooth and allow much easier removal.

To remove the Wolf Tooth, the gum around the tooth is numbed using either an anaesthetic gel or liquid or by injection. The Gum around the tooth is cut. The attachment of the root is then broken down until the Wolf Tooth is loose, this may take some time if there is a large root and may require a few different tools. once the Wolf Tooth is loose, it can be grasped and elevated out of its socket.



A selection of Wolf Teeth showing variety in size, shape and root lengths.

What treatment does the horse Need after the removal?

Most horses, heal the wound in the gum within 7- 10 days. It is a good idea to give the horse that time off and not expect it to have a bit in its mouth. Ensuring the horse is vaccinated for Tetanus is crucial and if it isn't the Vet will administer some Tetanus Anti-Toxin to protect the horse while the wounds are healing.

Antibiotics are not usually necessary and further pain relief can be given but would not be routinely used. Most Vets would perform a routine teeth rasping at the same time, if one was necessary, to ensure no sharp enamel points are left in the horses mouth.