Proper dental care for aging horses can dramatically extend both their vitality and overall lifespan.

In a similar trend to humans, the average domesticated horse is far-outliving its ancestors, and equine dentistry is a major factor in that phenomenon.

As recently as the 1980’s, horses over the age of 20 were considered geriatric. Sadly, many fell victim to “long-in-the-tooth” syndrome, and were often euthanased at the first sign of eating difficulties, physical feebleness or emaciation.

Fortunately, several factors have combined to drastically improve the overall health and longevity of horses in the modern era. Apart from ongoing advances in veterinary science, and heightened awareness of animal welfare, other major factors are the advent of processed fine-particle feeds …. and professional dental care.

33 year old Tommy had his teeth treated and was switched onto a processed diet in late March, 2011 (pic dated 19.03.2011)

Tommy, only 8 months later, displaying his renewed health and vitality (pic dated 24.11.2011).

Equine dentistry has evolved rapidly since the 1980’s. Refined research and studies in the field; the development and expansion of purpose-built instruments; and the professional level of expertise now on offer, can give aging horses a new “lease on life”.

Penny, a 34 year old Grulla buckskin pony, actively enjoys her longevity. She is incredibly healthy, has always held her condition (too much at times!), and is full of vitality. Owned and loved by Ailsa Mason of Maiden Gully. Penny is often ridden and doted upon by Ailsa’s grandchildren, including Madison and Jasmine pictured here

Much has been written about the necessity for routine equine dentistry, predominantly in relation to floating (filing/rasping) the ever-developing sharp enamel points of a horse’s molars, and the extraction of deciduous teeth from age 2½ to 4½.

Equally important however, is ongoing treatment of the aging equine population, as additional problems arise from their late teens and beyond. Such problems include:

Cupping

Caused by the gradual loss of the internal (vertical) folds of enamel in the molars as they wear down into their roots. No longer protected by the hard enamel ridges on the chewing tables, feedstuffs erode the softer dentine of the teeth to form a concave and glassy smooth facet on the former grinding surface. Cupping inhibits the proper mastication of grain, dry grasses and hays, and ultimately develops in more and more molars.

Established cupping and advanced cupping.

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**Diastemas**

Diastemas are gaps between teeth. Though evident in some naturally “gap-toothed” younger horses, they are more predominant in aging horses whose molars narrow as they wear down into their root systems. Diastemas are prime sites for food impaction which can trigger gingivitis (gum inflammation) and periodontitis (inflammation … and eventual deterioration … of the ligament that binds the molar within its socket). They can also cause horses to quid hay … that is, spit out partially chewed clumps of fibre … as they become frustrated by recently ingested fibre entangling with other fibres protruding from diastemas.

The dental problems arising in a horse’s old age are no longer the threat they were in years gone by. Ongoing dental care, including regular cleansing of diastemas, the timely extraction of loosening molars, and the judicial suggestion of appropriate diets, are adding ten years or more to their lives … and surely, there is no better gift you can give your horse.

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**Loose molars**

Disregarding diseases that can prematurely loosen teeth, horses of advanced age will generally start losing their molars from their early to mid 20’s onwards. Any amount of regular dental treatment throughout a horse’s life will not prevent this, as everyday grinding of their feed can wear away up to 4mms of their molars every year (though the wear rate does slow with age). To maintain contact with opposing teeth, a horse’s molars must constantly “erupt” from their reserve crown, but eventually become shallow in their sockets (which are backfilled by bone) as they wear down into their root systems. With less and less structures supporting the teeth, it becomes progressively uncomfortable for a horse to chew in the necessary manner … that is, with the considerable lateral pressure required to break down hard whole grains and long fibre in its diet. These teeth eventually work loose and dislodge from their shallow sockets.