

## A Comfortable Jaw = A Happy Horse

Many unhappy, possibly spooky, one sided, intermittently lame horses have TMJ (temporomandibular joint) distress. The biomechanics of the TMJ are directly related to a horse's posture, balance, rhythm, and general well being. The jaw joint is grossly overlooked by horsemen, veterinarians, and even equine dentists. It is the closest joint in the body to the brain and brain stem and is flooded with proprioceptors that tell the body where it is in space.

Many dental practitioners are far too focused on smoothing up those molar tables without even considering how their work affects the TMJ. Now with the advent of SO many new power instruments on the market it is easy to get over aggressive with the floating.

Even though horses do have continually erupting teeth, there is only so much tooth that can erupt over a year's time and that amount diminishes significantly as horses age. We see horses in our practice daily that have been overfloated in the molars to the extent that their table angles have been flattened and even sometimes reversed. These table angles are necessary for proper guidance to the jaw joint. It also leaves the horse riding on his incisors (front teeth) with little or NO molar contact. These horses go into TMJ Myofascial pain syndrome trying to clench the muscles that close the jaw in an effort to get their molars back in contact.

The trigger points for the temporalis, masseter and medial pterygoid muscles are extremely reactive. They are living in constant distress. There is a delicate three point balance between the incisors, the molars and the jaw joint, and when this is harmonious, the horse's nervous system is balanced and they can truly come through in their bodies. Overfloated molars can cause TMJ hyperreactivity, and too much pressure on the incisors causes even more distress even on the organs through neural connections and acupuncture meridian imbalances. These horses have static playing in their nervous systems. They cannot hear the subtle signals from a rider's hands or be responsive to the bit on the sensitive and sensual soft tissues in the mouth. Often their entire body is sore.



The jaw joint can move back and forth (anterior and posteriorly) as well as side to side (laterally). Anterior motion of the mandible is essential for proper movement throughout the entire horse's body. Most everybody checks for lateral motion; very few check for anterior motion.

What can you do? Listen to your horse chew his hay or graze on pasture. There should be a clear, hollow grinding sound as his molars masticate the forage. Palpate the trigger points around his jaw and see if they are comfortable. Look at your horse's front teeth. Are they symmetrical? When you lift his head up the lower incisors should move backwards toward his ears. More importantly, when you lower his head they should slide forward at least 1/8th of an inch.

Watch a dentist work before you let them practice on your horse. Do they palpate and evaluate the horse's TMJ? Do they address the incisors as well as the molars? Are they in a hurry? Do they over sedate the horse and then hoist or elevate their heads into an abnormal position to perform the dentistry? Do they understand that the work they are doing will directly affect the harmonics and resonance of your horse's nervous system? Are they using powerfloats or hand instruments designed to fit comfortably in a horse's mouth? The balance your equine dentist is creating in your horse's mouth is critical to proper biomechanics of the entire horse. Make sure it is appropriate! Please see [www.balancedequinewellness.com](http://www.balancedequinewellness.com) for more information. Dr. Heather Mack



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