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DOES YOUR HORSE NEED PROBIOTICS?

Probiotics might help reestablish healthy balances in the horse's gut microbiome without causing harm.

If your horse's gut microbiota is out of whack, microorganism-packed products might get him back on track. Inside the digestive system live millions of microscopic organisms that play vital roles in the horse's digestive—and general—health. Many of these are bacteria, protozoa, archaea, and fungi help break down food and usher nutrients efficiently into the bloodstream. They play a role in metabolizing fiber, generating energy, and promoting proper intestinal transit.

While scientists still don't know what makes up the ideal equine gut microbiota, they do know it's a question of balance. "All these microorganisms live in a kind of symbiotic relationship when they're in balance," says Kathleen Crandell, PhD, a nutritionist with Kentucky Equine Research, in Versailles.

Without listing the thousands of species or labeling certain microbes as good or bad, let's briefly say the "right" balance includes more *Lachnospiraceae* and *Ruminococcaceae* bacteria, which break down plant materials, and fewer *Streptococcus* and *Lactobacillus* bacteria, which produce lactic acid, Crandell says.

When that balance gets disrupted, so too does the symbiotic relationship, she explains. Horses might have intestinal discomfort, develop diarrhea, lose weight, experience energy loss and poor performance, seem generally unwell, and become more susceptible to illnesses.

To help shift that balance back in a direction that favors good health, scientists have isolated certain species of microorganisms from the microbiome and packaged them into oral powders, pastes, and liquids. These are probiotics.

You often see probiotics and prebiotics (fiber sources for the microbiota to break down, or "food" for the probiotics) packaged and supplemented together, but for the purpose of this article, we'll focus on the former.

Assessing Safety and Efficacy

Study results show probiotics are safe for most horses, Crandell says. But while in theory they should work, little hard scientific evidence shows they are beneficial.

Most of the important digestive action in horses occurs in the cecum and colon—the hindgut—where fiber, in particular, the mainstay of equine nutrition, gets broken down, says Simon Daniels, PhD, senior lecturer of equine management and science at the U.K.'s Royal Agricultural University, in Cirencester. It's here probiotics need to work their magic most, ideally reversing upsets in the favorable ratios between microorganism species.

The only way to get probiotics to the cecum, though, is orally—meaning the microorganisms must endure the acidity and digestive processes of the stomach and small intestine first. "We don't really know how well they survive that journey, but we do know (these conditions) have an effect on it," Daniels says.

Researchers also aren't sure if the probiotics stay in the cecum or keep moving out the other end, but initial study results suggest they don't stick around, says Crandell. "They don't seem to colonize," she says. "So the effect might only last as long as the probiotics are being given."

While scientists haven't confirmed probiotics' effects in horses, they seem safe to try in most cases, she says. "For the moment, it's really one of those things where it can't hurt and might help."

Top 5 Horses That Need Probiotics

It doesn't matter whether your horse is an athlete, a broodmare, a senior, or a pasture pet, our sources say. What matters is if he falls into a category of likely having gastrointestinal (GI) microbiota imbalance.

Here's a list of the Top 5 types of horses that might make good candidates for probiotic therapy.

The horse with diarrhea

Defecation that's too frequent and usually soft or even liquid is often a telltale sign of gut microbiota upset. "If there are problems in the microbiome, then the fecal consistency becomes soft," says Daniels.

While it's important to pinpoint the underlying condition to treat medically, owners can start probiotics to address digestive upset right away. "Using probiotics would be a way to try to stabilize that gut ecosystem in a horse with diarrhea or just loose droppings, even for unexplained reasons," Daniels says.

Crandell agrees: "For an adult horse with diarrhea, probiotics would definitely be one of my go-tos."

The "leaky gut" horse

Horses—like humans—can experience alterations in intestinal permeability that are commonly referred to as leaky gut. A layer of microbiota lining the inside walls of the digestive tract helps digest nutrients while also working as a barrier,

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keeping pathogens (disease-causing organisms) and large, undigested molecules from passing through the usually tight cellular junctions of the intestinal walls and slipping into the bloodstream, explains Crandell. “The gut really is leaking,” she says. The body’s response to circulating pathogens is inflammation, leading to generally compromised health. Horses with leaky gut can have diarrhea and show signs of intestinal discomfort such as mild colic.

“The idea is to give a probiotic that has the beneficial microorganisms necessary to reinforce the barrier and keep that gut from becoming leaky,” says Crandell.

In theory, she says, it should work—and studies in humans and rats using live yeast and *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* bacteria suggest it might, she says.

The stressed horse

Probiotics can’t do anything about stress itself, but our sources say these products can help with its side effects.

Stressed horses release large amounts of cortisol—the “stress hormone”—into their bodies, usually altering gut motility (which is why stressed horses have more frequent, liquid feces). When stress is short-lived, the gut can usually restore order itself. But when stress is prolonged or intense, the horse might struggle to get the microbiota back in balance.

Daniels typically sees probiotics as more of a fix than a preventive approach, but there’s no harm in giving them to horses before stressful times. “If you have a particularly high-strung animal that’s going to be traveling, for example, you could give probiotics in advance,” he says. “Hopefully that will help stabilize any effects in the gut.”

Crandell recommends starting probiotics a week before a stressful event. But horses used to travel and other high-stress situations probably don’t need them. “If it’s a seasoned show horse going off to events like any other day in his life, that’s not the kind of horse that might benefit,” she says.

The horse with high energy needs

Sport horses, certain broodmares and older horses, and hard keepers have higher energy needs and usually require a special diet. Often that means providing high-starch concentrated feeds. Large quantities of starch, however, can make the digestive tract more acidic, says Crandell. Worse, any starch that doesn’t get digested in the small intestine can make it back to the cecum.

“It starts to get broken down by starch loving bacteria there, and they produce lactic acid, which causes the pH to drop,” she says. In this acidic environment, the balance shifts, and the wrong microbes become dominant. “So what you’re doing by feeding a probiotic is trying to stabilize that pH in the hindgut.”

Meanwhile, probiotics could also help the GI tract extract energy from fiber more efficiently, says Daniels. “Researchers in animal nutrition and gut health have been working for a long time to try to improve the use of fiber,” he says. Haylage, for example, has higher energy content than hay and could replace some or all of a horse’s starchy feed ration. But for horses to benefit from the energy in haylage, their bodies must be able to extract it out of the fiber. Also, “obviously, when there’s high fiber in the diet, it’s got to be highly digestible,” he says.

Probiotics can provide the microbes necessary for breaking down fiber, Daniels says. “Especially for sport horses, you really want to make sure you’re getting the maximum amount of what you put in.”

Because of these potential benefits, manufacturers often add probiotics right into packaged feed, he says. “If you can potentially improve fiber degradability or reduce the harmful effects of starch, then that’s not a bad thing.”

The medicated horse

Despite their good, drugs can come at a price. Antibiotics, in particular, but also steroids and non-steroidal anti-inflammatories, can upset the gut microbiota balance as the drugs incidentally attack favorable bacteria or change the acidity of the environment. Even dewormers can change microbiota, and not all horses can get the balance back on their own, says Daniels.

Horse owners don’t necessarily need to give probiotics before or with the drug, he says—or at all. But they can monitor medicated horses for signs of gut trouble, which usually shows up as diarrhea.

“The classic example would be the horse that gets an injury and gets antibiotics, and now the droppings are loose,” Daniels says. “So then you want to restabilize things and get them kick-started again, so you add some probiotics.”

Special Concern: Young Foals

A new foal develops his unique gut microbiota rapidly, picking up microbes from the dam’s teats and skin, her droppings, and surrounding surfaces. So early life might be the wrong period for supplementing, says Crandell.

Daniels agrees: “From the studies that have been undertaken, it appears there is limited benefit in very young foals that are developing their own microbiome, which is initially heavily influenced by their dam and the milk diet.”

Research findings hint at a vulnerable period between 7 and 28 days of age when caretakers might want to avoid giving probiotics, Crandell says.

Existing Probiotics Research

Whereas probiotic research in humans is vast, very little research has shown the effect of probiotics in living horses.

A few teams around the world are trying to fill that gap. At Colorado State University, researchers have looked at how probiotics might help horses clear sand from their intestines (although the results weren’t very optimistic). Meanwhile, a U.K. group has studied the effects of yeast supplementation on ponies’ fecal microbiomes, with more positive results. Slovakian scientists have isolated bacterial strains from horse feces to test their effect as an equine probiotic. Lithuanian researchers are assessing the effects of newly isolated *Lactobacillus* species on endurance horses. And Dutch researchers are investigating how topical probiotics might help limb wounds heal.

On the other hand, scientists (Berreta et al., 2020) found inconsistencies between product labels and ingredients as well as

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the presence of antimicrobial-resistant genes in the bacteria of some commercial veterinary probiotics.

Daniels says he's hopeful that scientists will investigate the link between the microbiota and horse behavior and how probiotics might influence it. "I think we are all realizing that we are what we eat and that diet has a strong influence on not just our gut health but our overall health, moods, and behavior," he says. "I think it's extremely likely that the same happens with the horse."

Take-Home Message

By supplementing horses with the same kind of beneficial microorganisms that colonize their guts, probiotics might help reestablish healthy balances in the gut microbiome without causing harm. While research is still inconclusive about their efficacy, our sources believe these products might be worth trying when horses show signs of intestinal upset caused by illness, medications, stress, or feed or to get the most out of fiber's energy supply.

The Horse

HOW TO KEEP YOUR HORSE HYDRATED DURING THE WINTER

When the temperatures drop, make sure your horses always have access to water and are drinking enough.

As we head into an incredibly cold stretch of weather for the start of winter, there has been much discussion on how to prepare horses. Increasing forage intake to help keep core body temperature warm while it ferments in the digestive tract is incredibly important. Also consider providing blankets and shelter, depending on your horse's hair coat.

One factor we cannot overlook, however, is keeping horses hydrated. Most equine nutritionists consider water to be the most important nutrient because of the various functions it performs. These include regulating body temperature, digestion, absorption, and utilization of nutrients, moving feedstuffs through the digestive tract from mouth to rectum, and removing waste products.

How Much Water Does My Horse Need?

On average, the adult horse drinks approximately 1 gallon per 100 pounds of body weight; therefore, the average 1,000-pound horse needs about 10 gallons of water a day. It is very important to make sure horses are consuming enough water, especially when their diets are high in dry feed content, such as hay, to help ensure the feed is moving through the digestive system. If horses do not consume an adequate amount of water, they may become dehydrated quickly, could go off their feed, and might suffer from impaction colic.

Many horses decrease their water intake below required amounts in extremely cold weather for a variety of reasons, such as not wanting or being able to walk to a water source, water being too cold to drink (preferred water temperature is between 45 and 65 degrees F for most horses), or water being frozen.

Preventing Dehydration This Winter

Horse owners and managers can do several things to ensure their horses do not become dehydrated:

- If a drop in temperature is predicted, make sure water is freely available before the temperature change, so horses are properly hydrated before the cold weather hits.
- If hot water is not available in the barn, get insulated water jugs and bring it from the house. Invest in heated water buckets or a water heater. Make sure these are grounded, and routinely check to make sure they are working properly. A horse that gets shocked when he tries to drink will be conditioned to not drink!
- Break ice if it forms on the water source and remove the chunks of ice. Although horses can break through thin ice, it can deter them from drinking. "Frost-free" type waterers can be helpful, but even these can freeze if horses are not drinking often enough. Check water sources for ice at least twice a day and more often in colder conditions.
- Monitor your horse's hydration status daily. If you do not know how, ask your veterinarian or another experienced horse person to train you in doing skin pinch tests and evaluating mucous membranes.
- Soaking feeds can be a way to get additional water into your horse. For example, beet pulp is a feed that can hold a good amount of water, and most horses are willing to eat it. Chopped hays also absorb water and are usually willingly consumed by horses. Ideally, soak these dry feeds in warm water for about 15 minutes before offering them to the horse.

Take-Home Message

When the temperatures drop, make sure water is accessible at all times, and that horses are drinking enough. It is crucial to have water available at mealtimes, especially when feeding dry feeds; researchers have shown that horses drink the most water within three hours of consuming a meal. Finally, carefully monitor both water intake and hydration status daily, especially during extreme or rapid changes in the weather.

The Horse

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SKU - 16966

SIX SIGNS OF GOOD QUALITY HORSE HAY

Forage makes up between 50 and 90 percent or more of a horse's diet.

Much of the forage part of the diet comes in the form of hay. Because it's such a big part of the ration, a good quality hay can help keep a horse healthy, while a poor quality hay can be detrimental. This is why, as nutritionists and horse owners, we put a big emphasis on the quality of hay we feed.

The nutritional value of hay is the most important factor when determining its quality. This begins with the stage of plant maturity at time of harvest. Young, immature plants contain more nutrients than older, stemmier plants. Though after hay is harvested, the level of horse hay quality goes beyond the age of the plant at harvest.

When selecting your horse's forage, keep these six signs of good quality horse hay in mind:

1. High leaf-to-stem ratio

Think about the leafy greens you eat. You likely prefer greens with leaves rather than just stems. The same is true for your horse. Look for more flat leaves in the hay and fewer round stems; this indicates the plant was less mature when cut. More leaves typically mean higher digestibility and nutrient content for your horse.

2. Small diameter stems

Stems smaller in diameter or finer are also indicators of higher quality horse hay. Small stems mean the plant was less mature when cut. To test stem size, grab a handful of hay and give it a squeeze. Good quality hay is soft and pliable, and feels good in your hand. If it feels like you're squeezing a handful of sticks, it is not a good choice of hay to feed your horse.

3. Few seed heads or blooms

No matter the species of plant, hay with little to no seed heads or blooms indicates a younger, early maturity plant, and thus a higher quality hay. For example, timothy hay should be cut in the pre-bloom or early-bloom stage when you see little to no seed heads; and alfalfa should be cut when you see few to no blooms.

4. Fresh smell and appearance

On our farm, there's nothing like haying season. We love the smell of fresh hay. The same is true for your horse. Good quality hay should have a fresh cut smell and appearance. Avoid musty, moldy or off-setting smelling hay, because it can reduce palatability and indicate poor quality.

5. Cleanliness

Hay should be primarily made up of the harvested forages. Look for a clean forage with little to no dust. Even if the majority of the hay is high quality, hays containing dirt, mold, weeds, trash or other foreign materials indicate poorer quality hay and may be unfit to feed to horses.

6. Hay color

Good quality hay should be bright green in color with little fading. A bleached, yellow, brown or black color may indicate aged hay, mold or poor storage conditions. Storage condition and age have a significant effect on vitamin content of hays. Many vitamins, such as vitamins A and E, are not stable over time and lose biological activity. After approximately six months, almost all vitamin A and E activity levels are lost. The nutritional value of hay is compromised with increased exposure to heat, sunlight and rain, which speed up this process.

When good quality hay for your horse is scarce or too costly, you may need to compensate for poorer quality hay. You can do this by supplementing with a quality balanced horse feed. Hay balancers help provide the missing essential nutrients the horse requires in the diet. In some cases, they can replace hay in the diet entirely.

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SKU - 32986

HOW TO TARP HAY FOR WINTER STORAGE

Stacking and tarping your hay correctly can ensure quality forage for your horse all winter.

Hay has become a hot commodity. It's challenging to locate good hay, and it's expensive when you find it. When you do locate a good source, it's important to get your hay supply in and protected so it stays in good condition and lasts through the winter. Depending on where you live in North America, next year's hay crop might not be available until June through October. Plus, it can be difficult, expensive, and very stressful sourcing hay in the spring if you run low – speaking from experience!

As a horse business owner who needs to purchase around 40 tons of hay each year to get my crew of horses through the winter, I've seen all sorts of ways to stack it – with mixed results. In many cases I can tell the hay in some stacks is no longer of the caliber I'd want to feed to my horses.

This past fall was the first year we had to stack/tarp hay outside of our hay barn. We had to scramble to figure out how to do this correctly so the 20 tons we were stacking outdoors wasn't lost to rain and mold during the winter.

Preparing Your Stack

"Hay is a major investment," said Sandy Young, owner of Treasure Valley Hay, in Nampa, Idaho. Young has been a hay broker since 2008, focusing primarily on southwestern Idaho, but with customers in all Western states. "You're investing in high-quality food to keep your animals healthy and give you peace of mind knowing you have what you need to carry you through the winter until next summer."

Protecting your investment with a heavy-duty, high-quality tarp is critical. "If you don't at least cover the top of the stack with a good tarp, moisture from rain and snow will seep into the stack from the top down to the bottom and could ruin all the hay," she said.

Where you locate your stack is important. As with other structures on your horse property, place your haystack in a high, well-drained area. Make it easy to access for the initial delivery people, as well as efficient for you as you use the hay.

You'll need to place the stack on a barrier or structure to protect the bottom bales. Hay placed directly on the ground will wick up moisture, ultimately molding and rotting on the bottom. "Start with wood or plastic pallets, or a thick, dense layer of flakes of straw," said Young. "If you do need to put your stack directly on the ground, be sure to place the cut edge of the bale down, strings to the side, so damaged hay will be easier to pick off."

"We try to stack hay so the exposed sides of the stack are (uniformly) straight, up and down, with no ledges," said Young. "We also try to overlap the bottom bales on the pallets, so the hay bales just hang over the edge (of the pallet) a little bit. That way rain and snow won't settle on the (pallet) boards and wick moisture back under the bale, causing superficial damage."

You can make your hay-stack as tall as you want. If you are hand-stacking, it will probably be four to eight layers high. If your hay is delivered by equipment, such as a haystack retriever, it will be in a prestacked amount, usually nine layers high, and it won't need to be readjusted. The weight will vary but is usually 3 to 5 tons.

Choosing The Right Tarp

"Prep the top of your stack with a single row of bales laid end to end, across the middle of the top," said Young. "This will form a peak (once the tarp is placed across it) so the pile sheds water like a roof and you won't get puddles which eventually leak." Tarps are not 100% waterproof. "Don't set anything on top to hold the tarp down," she added. "It creates a depression that causes water to puddle, which is likely to cause leaking."

The way you spread and secure the tarp is crucial to the lasting quality of the hay. "I've seen all sorts of ways to do this," said Young. Her suggestions include using long nail spikes and pushing them through the tarp grommets into the hay, kind of like "nailing" the tarp into the hay. You can also screw dog tie-out stakes into the hay and attach them to the tarp. Rubber bungees, ropes, and baling twine can also be used to secure the tarp. Young said she prefers to create baling twine loops with long tails that she secures to the pallets prior to building the stack. These can simply be used to cinch the tarp down once everything is in place. "Wind is the biggest enemy of your tarp," she noted. "Tie your tarp snug, and don't let it flap in the wind."

"You can get a tarp big enough to cover the stack completely, all the way to the ground," she added. "Or get one that's just big enough to go over the (top) edges and down the sides at least a couple of feet. If the ends of the bales (on the sides of the stack) are not covered, they'll get weathered, which is okay, unless there's a hay ledge that snow or rain settles on and soaks into."

Weathered hay that's merely discolored is fine to feed horses. Wet and moldy is not. "Get a good heavy-weight tarp with lots of grommets. Do not get a lightweight, cheap tarp, you'll regret it," said Young.

"A good, heavy tarp should last three to five years," said Brad Jensen, a dealer in Western Ag hay tarps, the flagship blue and white tarps used by commercial hay growers and dairy owners. "Use a good-quality tarp, create a peak (at the top of your stack), keep the tarp tight, and take care of it so it extends the life of the tarp."

Western Ag tarps have boards and a rope sewn into them. "The rope is attached to the board, so you aren't just pulling on a grommet that can rip out," said Jensen.

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The biggest reason tarps wear out is they aren't tied properly, and when they are flailing around in the wind they break down. "Tie the tarp down and keep it tight," said Jensen. "This helps them last longer. If you want to reuse the tarp for next year, clean it up and fold it up nicely. We usually hang them on a wall where the mice won't nest and make holes in them."

If your stack is two pallets wide, the tarp should be a minimum of 12 feet wide. "That'll give you a 1-2 foot overhang of the tarp on the stack's sides," said Young. "If the tarp is too big, it will be heavy and bulky, and difficult to manage." Young suggested working with multiple smaller tarps that are at least 24 feet long and overlapping them. This is especially useful once you start to take hay from the stack.

"If you use multiple tarps, overlap them by at least a 4-foot minimum, with the opening facing away from the prevailing winds and downhill," she said. This will hopefully prevent water and snow from working its way under the tarp and ruining the hay.

"Check the ties often, and keep them taut," she added. To extend the tarp's life span, Young suggested placing an old tarp, sheets, towels, or horse blankets as padding beneath it (along edges or on corners of the stack). This reduces the friction created by the wind rubbing the tarp against the hay.

Like many other things on a horse property, stacking and tarping hay for winter storage can be a chore. "Take a deep breath and relax," said Young. "At least you know you've got plenty of good hay." And know that winter doesn't last forever.

The Horse

DO I NEED A DENTAL EXAM FOR MY HORSE?

An owner's Morgan mare might have something wrong with her teeth. A veterinarian with an interest in equine dentistry explains what to expect from the dental examination.

Q. I have a Morgan mare who, I think, might have something wrong with her teeth. What should I expect from a dental examination for my horse?

A. Dental examinations can vary from a superficial examination to identify major abnormalities only to a detailed examination that hopefully will reveal the smallest dental problem. The age and use of the horse will influence the type of examination performed.

Some practitioners' exams consist of flushing the mouth to remove feed and hay, a visual examination, and possibly a manual examination. This type of examination might identify many problems, especially if the horse is amenable. However, it has the potential to miss problems, especially at the back of the mouth.

As such, it's wise to use a veterinarian that uses a full-mouth speculum for dental exams, which allows him or her to visualize and palpate all aspects of the horse's cheek teeth. Most practitioners sedate horses before a speculum exam.

Who Needs Dental Exams?

Newborn foals should be examined to see if there is proper alignment of the incisors (parrot-mouthed or sow-mouthed) or congenital defects of the lips or palate. Procedures that help in correcting malalignment might be available.

All horses going into or already in training should have dental examinations (at least annually) to allow the identification and correction of dental problems such as sharp enamel points and the presence of wolf teeth.

Retired and/or senior horse also require dental examinations and treatment. The latter group might require more frequent evaluation and treatment than younger horses (often every six months) as older horses are at risk for a number of dental issues.

What Problems Might Your Vet Find?

As mentioned before, sharp enamel points will cause discomfort as a bit or noseband might push the cheeks into the sharp points on the outside of the upper cheek teeth. And, not all wolf teeth cause problems, but no wolf tooth ever helped the horse, and some do cause problems. So, most wolf teeth are extracted.

Other problems that should be identified include retained deciduous incisors and premolars (caps), tall/long (dominant) teeth, hooks, ramps, beaks, and unlevel chewing surfaces front to back. The chewing surface of the cheek teeth normally slopes 10-15% from side to side.

Infected or diseased teeth do occur, although they are rare. They are indicated by facial or mandibular swellings, draining tracts, slow eating, holding the head to the side, and bad odor of the mouth. If there are signs of an infected tooth, radiographic examination probably is indicated.

The owner should expect to be told and/or shown what problems/abnormalities the veterinarian identifies and what effect those abnormalities might have on eating, performance, and long-term dental health. The owner should be given an estimate of the professional fees for any indicated corrective procedures. If the corrective procedures are beyond the examiner's expertise, knowledge, or instrumentation, the owner should expect to be referred to a specialist.

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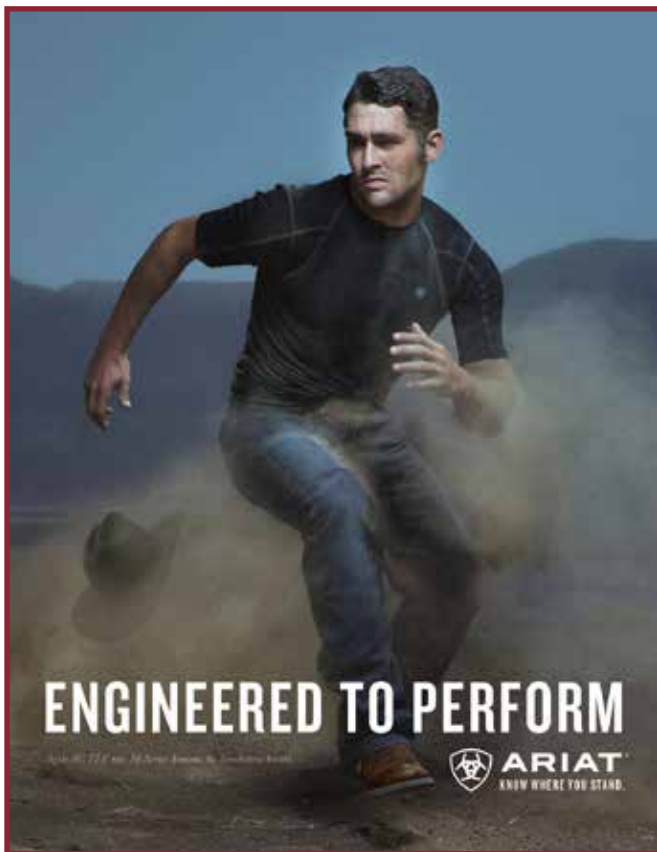
The Bottom Line

Dental examinations are important in the health management of the horse and should be performed on a regular basis. This might be on a six to 12 month basis as indicated by the horse's age, use, expected level of performance, and overall condition of the teeth. A 10-year old in light pleasure riding should be examined yearly to see if corrective procedures are indicated.

Late two-year olds or late three-year olds in top level competition might need to be seen every month as they shed (or fail to shed) deciduous premolars (caps) and the new permanent cheek teeth develop sharp enamel points. A few horses have such bad occlusions that they need corrective procedures every three months, although that is unusual.

Owners need to observe their horse's eating habits and performance characteristics closely. If the horse changes either eating and/or performance habits, a dental examination is indicated. Abnormal conditions found at examination need to be corrected. This prevents minor problems from becoming major problems. Good dental care can help reduce the risk of colic and choke, prolong the effectiveness of the teeth, increase feed efficiency, and keep horses performing well.

The Horse



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