

Horse Behavior and Stable Vices

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Horse Program

Providing research-based information to Minnesota Horse Owners

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Horses have evolved to socialize, move around, and spend about two thirds of their time grazing. Modern horse management systems do not always allow horses to exhibit these normal behaviors and sometimes problem behaviors can arise as a result. These problems include cribbing, weaving, stall/fence walking, and separation anxiety. Behavior problems are especially troublesome if the horse spends a majority of their time performing the behavior, or if the behavior could be harmful to someone.

FOUR KEYS TO AVOIDING UNWANTED BEHAVIOR

1) *Time spent indoors*

Efforts should be made to reduce the amount of time spent in a stall by allowing the horse plenty of turnout and exercise. A stall is not a natural environment for a horse. When given the choice of being in a paddock or in a stall, horses will often choose a paddock, even if there is inclement weather. More information on pasture management is available in the following fact sheet: “Managing Established Horse Pastures” (publication #08460).

2) *Keep horses in herds, not alone*

Horses are naturally social animals and have evolved to live in herds. A herd size of 4-10 same sex horses work best; with the obvious exception being stallions. Constantly changing the herd can be stressful for horses (e.g. adding new horses) and should be minimized if possible. If it is not possible to keep a horse in a herd, try

introducing the horse to another animal, such as a goat, donkey, or sheep. If a horse is kept with any of these species, check with a veterinarian to see if any changes are warranted to the horse’s vaccination or health plan.

3) *Diet*

It is recommended to keep horses on a high forage diet while at the same time meeting their nutritional needs. Horses should be fed based on age, bodyweight, and activity. When horses do not receive adequate long-stemmed forage (hay or pasture), they can develop behaviors such as wood chewing, wind sucking, or cribbing. Limited amounts of forage or large amounts of grain can also increase the risk of colic. When pasture grazing is not an option, providing several (three to four) small meals per day is preferred over a fewer larger meals. This increases the time the horse spends eating and simulates grazing. More information on nutrition is available in the following three fact sheets: “10 Things Everyone Should Know About Nutrition for the Mature Horse” (publication #08548), Nutrition of the

Weanling and Yearling Horse (publication #08456) and Vitamin and Mineral Nutrition of the Horse (publication #08541).

4) Training

When training a horse (or selecting a trainer), choose a training method that favors positive rewards rather than focusing on negative reinforcement. There are many horse training methods available. It is the responsibility of the owner to choose a method that has the best interest of both the horse and the owner in mind. Training methods that utilize negative reinforcement can lead to many undesirable behaviors such as bolting and rearing.

MANAGING EXISTING BEHAVIOR ISSUES

Horses sometimes develop an unwanted behavior problem from a previous life experience and do not improve the behavior, even if the environment, training method, and diet are ideal. While these behaviors may never stop, below are some suggestions on how unwanted behaviors can be managed.

Cribbing and Windsucking

Cribbing is a repetitive behavior where the horse places its upper incisors against a horizontal surface, arches its neck, and pulls backwards with its body while making a grunting sound. Windsucking is similar to cribbing, but is done without the horse grasping an object with its teeth. Cribbing horses sometimes have lower gastric pH than normal horses, produce less saliva, have slower oro-cecal transit times and have a greater incidence of stomach ulcers than non-cribbing horses.

There is a strong correlation between diet and cribbing (and windsucking). Increasing the amount of long-stemmed forage (hay or pasture) available, reducing the amount of grain in the diet, offering multiple types of forage (such as adding hay cubes), and increasing the number of meals per day are possible solutions for a horse that cribs.



Figure 1: New research shows that mirrors may help decrease the incidence of weaving.

Commercially available crib collars may reduce the frequency of cribbing, but are not intended to solve the cause of cribbing. The use of crib collars may cause an elevation in stress hormones when compared to the stress hormones in a horse that is allowed to crib.

Weaving

Weaving is a side to side movement of the horse's head and neck which is sometimes accompanied by a lifting and lowering of the feet. Weaving is often caused by the stress of being separated from the herd or being confined to a stall. To reduce the amount of time that a horse spends weaving, increase the time spent out of the stall (i.e. in a paddock or pasture) and allow the horse to see neighboring horses when in the stall. If the horse

must be confined to the stall, research has shown that installing a mirror (the mirror must be non-breakable) will reduce the time spent weaving.

Separation anxiety

Separation anxiety is when a horse gets stressed (nervous) when separated from other horses. The horse might neigh or scream, and be difficult to handle. When dealing with a horse with separation anxiety, try separating the horse gradually. For example, lead the horse around the pasture before leading them out of the pasture, or take the horse away and bring it back to the pasture repetitively. If you notice a loss of weight in the horse, call your veterinarian.

Bucking

Bucking is a normal behavior for horses in a herd. It is used to establish a pecking order. When being ridden, horses may buck because of discomfort in their back from poor saddle fit, an unbalanced rider, or frustration from not being able to move where they want to go. If you have a horse that bucks, make sure that it is not from physical discomfort before assuming it is a behavioral issue. Work with a reputable saddle fitter to help rule out poor saddle fit and a veterinarian to rule out injury.



Figure 2. Horse rearing

Rearing

Rearing is a normal play behavior in a herd, but can be quite dangerous when done in the presence of a human. Rearing is often triggered by something specific,

such as rein pressure or not wanting to go near a frightening object. If a horse rears, identify the trigger and find a way to work around it safely. A calm and quiet approach is ideal because rearing is generally caused by fear or pain. Responding with negative reinforcement could make the behavior worse. Training the horse to go forward on cue is important in reducing the reoccurrence of rearing.

Head shaking

Headshaking is when the horse repetitively shakes its head for no obvious reason. There are many potential causes for headshaking, such as nerve pain, ear mites, dental problems, allergies, or disease. One

change that may reduce headshaking is to keep the horse away from flies and out of the sun (another common trigger).

There are commercially available nose nets

for reducing headshaking while riding. These are thought to be helpful in alleviating nerve pain, and have been proven to reduce the incidence of headshaking.

Wood chewing

Wood chewing is a common behavior in horses. Chewing the wood on stalls or fence posts can be



Figure 3. Nose nets can reduce headshaking when the horse is ridden

frustrating for the horse owner and may cause further problems if the horse swallows splinters or wears their teeth down in the process. Horses who spend abnormal amounts of time chewing wood may be suffering from an unbalanced diet, specifically inadequate forage intake. Increasing the amount of long-stemmed forage (hay or pasture) available, reducing the amount of grain in the diet, offering multiple types of forage (such as adding hay cubes), and feeding more, small meals per day are possible solutions for a horse that chews wood. If a horse will not stop chewing wood, try covering the surface with a material that will not splinter or wear the teeth down (i.e. rubber).



Figure 4. Wood chewing can cause tooth wear and the ingestion of splinters

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