

Understanding your horse

Horses are individuals and getting to know their character and temperament is part of developing a successful partnership with your horse. Becoming familiar with their 'normal' behaviour patterns is also important as any unusual behaviour or actions can be a sign that all is not well in your horse's world.



Behavioural Problems

Horses that behave badly when being ridden can be frightening and dangerous. Some types of bad behaviour can be attributed to high spirits as a result of 'freshness' and turning the horse out every day or lunging for 10-15 minutes before riding can help. However, there are some behavioural traits that are more serious and need to be addressed.

Bolting: the horse gallops off at speed and does not respond to the rider's commands. This is often due to a physical problem from which the horse is trying to escape, but can also be a sign of lack of training or a bad temperament. Get your vet to check that your horse isn't suffering from any painful physical problems, such as a bad back or a sore mouth. Changing the bit may help you to have greater control but will rarely solve the problem.

Rearing: the horse lifts its front feet off the ground and stands on its hind feet, in extreme cases toppling over backwards. It is sometimes caused by over-excitement but some horses will rear when they are trying to get away from or refusing to do something, e.g. jumping or leaving other horses. However, the cause may be physical such as a back problem, sore mouth or badly fitting tack.

Bucking: the horse kicks its back feet out, throwing the rider forward and sometimes unseating them. Some horses buck simply because they are 'fresh' and feeling well, or are reacting negatively to the rider's actions, but it can also be a sign that they have a physical problem.

Kicking: horses that kick can be dangerous to people and other horses. Always be careful when walking behind horses and if your horse is prone to kicking out keep well away from other horses when riding. Some horses kick the door at feed times as a sign of impatience, but in serious cases stabled horses can destroy doors or partitions and injure themselves. Covering doors and walls with padding may stop this behaviour in some cases. Horses that kick, or threaten to kick

people are often reacting to previous mistreatment and need careful handling to help them regain their trust in humans.

Biting: this is often associated with stallions but otherwise well-mannered horses may bite when groomed in a rough manner or when their girth is tightened.

Head shaking: all horses shake or toss their heads from time to time but in some cases the head shaking is so frequent or violent that it becomes difficult to control. Causes are numerous and include allergies, nerve sensitivity, eye conditions and dental problems. Many treatments have been attempted with varying results, including the fitting of a net mask to reduce the sun's glare or a nose net to reduce inhaled air and pollen.

Vices

Some horses display undesirable behaviour traits or habits that are known as 'vices'. The causes for these can vary from physical to psychological. Many are exacerbated by boredom and are more common in horses that are kept confined for long periods of time. Many people believe that horses can learn vices from others although recent research has cast doubt on this. Vices are generally very difficult and in many cases impossible to eradicate.

Box walking: the horse continuously walks around his stable in circles. Usually initiated by boredom but may become a habit which can result in damage to ligaments and joints, fatigue and reduced appetite. The best solution is to turn the horse out as much as possible, but if you do have to stable your horse make sure he has some form of distraction such as a rubber ball or tyre to play with, or a mirror fixed to one wall of his stable.

Crib-biting: the horse grasps the edge of an object such as the top of his stable door with his incisor teeth, arches his neck and may suck air in at the same time. This causes wear to the front teeth and can eventually lead to problems eating. Crib-biting is usually caused by boredom, isolation from other horses and stress. Prevention can be attempted by covering wooden surfaces with metal or rubber or by applying unpleasant tasting liquids/pastes to any surface your horse may attempt to chew.

Windsucking: this is an advanced form of cribbing where the horse arches his neck while gulping air without grasping a solid object. Contrary to popular belief studies have revealed that air is not actually swallowed and does not reach the stomach. Windsucking may be initiated by boredom, stress, chronic pain or long-term gastro-intestinal disorders. Recent evidence suggests that windsucking is a pleasurable sensation due to endorphin release. However, the vice can lead to interrupted feeding, appetite loss and malnutrition and can also predispose to some types of colic.



Weaving: the horse shifts his weight from one front leg to the other, swaying his head and neck from side to side. It is caused by stall confinement, isolation from other horses and stress. Weaving can vary from very mild, seen only at feeding times, to continuously when in the stable or even when turned out. The vice causes abnormal wear to shoes or hooves and can reduce eating time. Although vertical bars or a V-shaped grille can be fixed above the stable doors it is almost impossible to stop.

Top Tips

- If your horse is behaving badly there may be a physical reason so get your horse checked over by a vet.
- Horses are designed to graze constantly and can become stressed if they have long periods without food. If your horse is stabled feed hay at frequent intervals and add chaff to his feed to encourage him to chew more and so eat more slowly.
- If your horse has to be stabled for long periods leave a radio on during the day as the sound will help to prevent boredom and consider providing distractions such as a rubber tyre or ball or a flavoured horse lick.
- Horses respond best to calm patient handling so never lose your temper.