



# EQUINE VICES



# OVERVIEW

- Unwanted behaviors are repetitive, purposeless behaviors that take up a large portion of a horse's time. Common examples include cribbing, biting and weaving.
- These behaviors frustrate horse owners. As a result, we often refer to them as vices. A vice is a fault or failing on the part of the horse. Vices usually start when there is something wrong with the horse's environment.
- Horses sometimes pick up unwanted behaviors from past events and don't improve their behavior even with an ideal environment, training method and diet.
- While these behaviors may never stop, we have some tips to manage horses with unwanted behaviors.

# CRIBBING

- Cribbing is a repetitive behavior where the horse places its upper teeth against a flat surface, arches its neck, and pulls backwards with its body while making a grunting sound. Windsucking is similar to cribbing, but the horse doesn't grasp an object with its teeth.
- Contrary to belief, cribbing horses don't swallow air.
- Cribbing may cause the following changes in your horse:
  - Increase in stomach acidity
  - Decrease in saliva production
  - Slower digestive passage
  - Increase of stomach ulcers occurring
- A horse's diet strongly relates to cribbing and windsucking.



# CRIBBING

- To reduce cribbing
  - Increase the amount of long-stemmed forage (hay or pasture) available
  - Reduce the amount of grain in the diet
  - Offer multiple types of forage (such as adding hay cubes)
  - Feed more, small meals per day
- Commercially available crib collars may reduce the occurrence of cribbing, but often won't solve the cause of cribbing. Crib collars may increase stress hormones compared to actively cribbing horses.

# PAWING

- Pawing is the tendency of horses to dig holes or stomp the ground repeatedly.
- Causes of Pawing:
  - Confinement
  - Boredom
  - Excess food
  - Giving treats
- To reduce pawing:
  - Provide exercise
  - Limit excess food
  - Provide diversion



## WEAVING/PACING

- Weaving is a side-to-side movement of the horse's neck and weight, which sometimes occurs with lifting and lowering of the feet. Stress often causes weaving and occurs in horses separated from the herd or confined to a stall.
- To reduce weaving
  - Increase the time spent out of the stall (i.e. in a paddock or pasture)
  - Allow the horse to see neighboring horses when in the stall
  - Put up a non-breakable mirror if you must confine the horse to a stall (research has shown that putting up a mirror will reduce the time spent weaving)
- New research shows that mirrors may help decrease the incidence of weaving.



## SEPERATION ANXIETY

- Separation anxiety is when a horse gets stressed when separated from other horses. The horse might neigh or scream and be hard 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 weight loss in the horse, call your veterinarian.



# BUCKING

- Bucking is a normal behavior for horses in a herd. Bucking creates a pecking order. Horses may buck while being ridden 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 well-known saddle fitter to help rule out poor saddle fit and a veterinarian to rule out injury.





# REARING

- Rearing is a normal play behavior in a herd, but can be dangerous in the presence of people. Specific events such as rein pressure or fear can trigger rearing.
- If a horse rears, find the trigger and a way to safely work around it. Handle the horse calmly and quietly as fear and pain are often the source of rearing. Responding with negative reinforcement could make the behavior worse. Training the horse to go forward on cue is key in reducing further rearing.



# HEADSHAKING

- Headshaking is when the horse continually shakes its head for no clear reason. Likely causes for headshaking include:
  - Nerve pain
  - Ear mites
  - Dental problems
  - Allergies
  - Disease
- To reduce headshaking
  - Keep your horse away from flies
  - Keep your horse out of the sun
  - Use a nose net while riding, nose nets may ease nerve pain



# WOOD CHEWING

- Wood chewing results in damage to wooden stalls and fences. Wood chewing may cause further problems if the horse swallows splinters or wears down their teeth. Excessive wood chewing horses may be suffering from an unbalanced diet, specifically poor forage intake.
- Wood chewing can cause tooth wear and the ingestion of splinters
- To reduce wood chewing
  - Increase the amount of long-stemmed forage (hay or pasture) available
  - Decrease the amount of grain in the diet
  - Feed multiple types of forage (such as adding hay cubes)
  - Feed more, small meals per day
- If your horse won't stop wood chewing, cover the surface with a material (such as rubber) that won't splinter or wear down their teeth.



# PREVENTING UNWANTED BEHAVIORS

- Allowing your horse turnout and exercise can provide a more natural environment for your horse.
- As social animals, horses have evolved to live in herds.
- Keep horses on a high forage diet while meeting their nutritional needs. You should feed your horse based on its age, body weight, and activity.
- When training a horse, choose a training method that uses positive reinforcement away from abuse or force.
- Highly controlled environments cause unwanted behaviors.



## TREATMENT OF UNWANTED BEHAVIOR

- Treating unwanted behaviors can be hard. If the environment stays the same the horse will continue the unwanted behavior. If the owner improves the environment, what may start as an effort to return to natural behavior may release tension for the horse. The tension release may support the unwanted behavior and cause it to occur again.
- The longer a horse participates in an unwanted behavior, the harder it is to treat. The behavior makes the horse feel good, which makes it hard to stop. The best measure you can take when considering unwanted behaviors is prevention.