

Nervous horse management

Vetoquinol advises you to consult your veterinary surgeon concerning any specific health questions about your horse. The information contained in this document is intended for educational purposes only.

Horse behaviour as a herd animal

Horse behaviour is best understood from the perspective that horses are prey animals with a well-developed fight-or-flight instinct. Their first response to a threat is to flee, although they are known to stand their ground and defend themselves or their offspring in cases where flight is untenable, such as when a foal would be threatened.



Horses are highly social herd animals that prefer to live in a group. Like all creatures, equine social behaviour developed to help the species survive. There also is a linear dominance hierarchy in any herd. They will establish a «pecking order» for the purpose of determining which herd member directs the behaviour of others, eats and drinks first, and so on. This behaviour pattern also applies to their interrelationship with humans. A horse that respects the human as a «herd member» who is higher in the social order will behave in a more appropriate manner towards all humans than a horse that has been allowed to engage in dominant behaviour over humans.

Sources of Stress

The performance horse has many possible sources of physical and psychological stress to contend with, including the following:

- **Intense or prolonged exercise** (whether in training or competition)
- **Adverse environmental conditions**, particularly high heat and humidity, but also dust and very cold or windy weather

Heat Stress

During exercise heat production will increase up to 50 %. This can create a problem when exercising under extremely hot and humid conditions. In response to heat stress the horse will increase its sweating rate, move a large portion of blood flow to capillaries under the skin, and increase its rate of respiration (may be over 20 breaths per minute in a resting horse) to help in the cooling process. Some horses will have a condition called “anhidrosis”, which is when the horse lacks the ability to sweat. This makes their coat feel very hot yet dry. The horse’s number one means of cooling down is through evaporation. When it does not sweat it is not able to use this method of cooling and the risk of overheating is even greater! Another way horses will show heat stress is with an increase in resting heart rate. At rest a normal range of heartbeats per minute should be between 28 and 36, however, when heat stressed it can be over 50. Internal rectal temperature will also be elevated to 104°F or higher.

Cold Stress

Horses fight cold weather by using energy to stay warm. As a general rule, a 1% increase in energy requirement is needed to replace energy loss from cold weather for each degree the temperature falls below the horse’s critical temperature. Critical temperature is the temperature below which a horse starts to expend additional energy to provide warmth. This temperature for individual horses will vary because of fat cover, hair thickness, acclimatization of the horse to cold, hair/coat wetness, and wind chill. For example, horses clipped during the winter months will have a much higher critical temperature and will have to be blanketed to help thermoregulation. You can tell if a horse is losing too much heat if snow melts on its back instead of accumulating on top of its hair; shivering can also be an indication.

Long-distance transport to and from shows (i.e. trips lasting longer than 6–8 hours)

Transport Stress : Below are some reasons why transporting can be stressful to your horse:

- **Physical factors**
 - unnatural sense of confinement
 - withholding food and/or water
 - noise and vibration of a moving vehicle
 - balancing and bouncing during the ride
 - poor ventilation
 - presence of exhaust, dust, molds, manure, and urine
- **Psychological factors**
 - separation from the herd
 - exposure to strange animals and environment
- **Climatic factors**
 - high internal temperature and humidity
- **Health factors**
 - dehydration
 - fatigue from constant balancing
- **Insufficient rest** between athletic events or after long-distance transport
- **New experiences** during training or competition
- **Confinement**
- **Removal from familiar environment** and social group
- **Changes in daily routine** when travelling and at shows



Increased stress levels in the handlers and rider

With repeated exposure, many horses become accustomed to most of these stressors, and these activities or situations cease to be a significant source of stress. However, it takes only one new or anxiety-inducing thing to stress a horse. Some horses never quite adjust to all the extra stimulation associated with training, showing, and travelling.

Stress manifestation

Each horse deals with stress in a different way depending on their personality.

Demonstrative, Confident Horse • Lets you know when it is stressed!

- Bucks, kicks, bites, is very curious, mouthy, a troublemaker, etc.

Demonstrative, Fearful Horse • Worries about everything!

- Shies the first time it sees things and needs time to relax.

Passive, Confident Horse

- Usually wonders, "What's everyone worried about?"
- Not normally stressed, internalizes stress, shows little change even when stressed.
- Usually is the last one in the field to take off running if something runs out of the woods.

Passive, Fearful Horse

- Wants to please!
- Seems willing to do anything, but will tighten muscles and lips when stressed.
- Won't show fear until pushed over the limit.

How to manage your horse's stress?

A tense horse, as is also the case with people, is often not able to listen, learn or perform to its best but there are numerous easy-to-apply techniques that you can use to help keep your horse relaxed.

Psychology

Horses are creatures of habit. Is there something new on the yard he doesn't like? Have you changed your feed, stabling, bedding or work programme, moved a new horse on to the yard or changed paddocks? You may be surprised how even little things can upset your horse.



Feeding management

If your horse is a little too fizzy for your liking, take a look at his diet. Are you feeding too much quick-release carbohydrate? Talk to a feed company's helpline about slow-energy feeds.

Attention to the environment

Heat stress management

When treating heat stress, the first thing you will need to do is move your horse to a shady area. Provide fans, wind, or other forms of ventilation, which will help with the evaporation process. Spraying the horse with cold water, specifically the legs and abdomen, will also help in this process because the veins and arteries lie just below the skin and can rapidly cool blood flowing to internal organs. Allow the horse to drink small amounts of water frequently and provide electrolytes to replace those lost by excessive sweating. In severe cases you should contact a veterinary surgeon immediately. Cold-water enemas will probably be administered and the horse will be treated for dehydration.



Cold stress management

To help horses decrease their critical temperature, one needs to precondition them for cold weather. Making sure horses carry enough weight to use as energy and insulation is a good way to go into winter. Provide free choice grass hay during the winter months, which will allow the horses to always produce enough internal heat through gastrointestinal fermentation. Providing shelter from wind, rain, and cold is important. If you have a horse that is not allowed in the shelter with other horses it is a good idea to provide a blanket, especially when there is freezing rain. Be sure blankets are waterproof. A wet blanket may cause a horse to lose more heat than it would if it were not blanketed.

Food supplements

There are many «calmers» available. Some are traditional herbal application (e.g. Passion flower [passiflore]), while others are based on research and theories about dietary levels of vitamins (notably the B-vitamins), minerals (principally magnesium availability), certain amino acids (e.g. L-tryptophan) and manufactured compounds. If you are competing under rules, make sure that none of the ingredients is banned.

Muscle massage

This can help release tension in the horse's muscles, but make sure a qualified equine physiotherapist does it. Also, make time to give your horse a good strapping. A good thorough grooming will get the blood flowing, making him feel good and, hopefully, taking his mind of any potentially stressful situations.

Toys

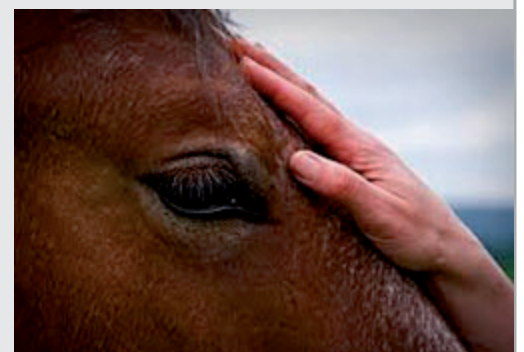
These can be useful for a horse who gets stressed because he is bored. There is a wide range available for purchase. Some people prefer to make their own toys by suspending water-filled lemonade bottles or swedes in the stable or on field fencing.

Voice

Talk to your horse in a low and calming tone if he is getting upset. It will reassure him that you are there and that you are not worried.

Exercise

Turn out, loose-school or ride your horse to get rid of any excess energy he might have before a competition



Travelling

Lots of horses don't travel well alone. If your horse has this problem, think about finding a companion.

A horse who kicks in the horsebox will upset others as well as run up a bill for damage, so try putting covering boots on his back feet to dull the noise and take the «enjoyment» out of it for him. To decrease transportation stress it is recommended to keep your total travel time under 12 hours. If this is not possible, plan overnight stops where you can unload your horse and allow it to rest. It is also recommended to stop every 3 to 4 hours to offer the horse's legs a break from the vibration, and provide water every 6 to 8 hours of the trip. Before long hauls, especially during competition, it is a good idea to put your horse on a vitamin E supplement (1000 to 2500 IU/day) to help them cope with the stress.

Your attitude

Try to stay calm yourself. If your horse is nervous, he will look to you for reassurance. Getting worked up about the fact that your horse is stressed will only reinforce his instinct and make the problem worse. Calmly try to identify and remove whatever is causing the stress

Overall health

Most importantly, ensure that the reason your horse is upset is not because of a veterinary problem that is causing pain and anxiety

Summary of How to Minimize Stress in Your Horse's Life:

- Keep horses turned out as much as possible but if not possible, feed ad libitum hay.
- Stick to a routine but if you need to make changes, do so slowly.
- When travelling take items that are familiar (e.g. your own hay, water, grain, etc.).
- Avoid riding in extreme weather conditions.
- Feed a well balanced diet.
- Maintain a good health programme.
- Provide a pleasant environment.
- Provide regular varied exercise.
- Allow for play time.
- Prevent boredom.
- Allow your horse social activity.
- Keep yourself happy, healthy, and stress free!!