

## Recognizing Stress in Horses

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More often than not, our horses will show signs of stress. And just as often, horse owners can control the amount of stress seen in our horses. There are many indicators of stress. If stress levels stay low, chances are, the ride and overall experience will be a much positive one. Further, you will add life to your horse and allow him to be much happier and overall health will increase as well. But how do we recognize stress in our horses? Does it increase when we leave home? Chances are, the less frequent you leave home with your horse, the higher the stress level will be when you do leave. Never the less, horses can show signs of stress at home on a daily basis in some cases.

Horses that are experiencing stress may offer many signs to its owner. For example, they may appear to be frightened and/or nervous. We may see this in the form of running or in some cases they develop vices such as cribbing and stall weaving. Abnormal sweating can also signal a stressful situation for your horse. Muscle tone can also provide some clues. If the horse is tense and the muscles are contracted, it may be tying up. If the muscles are flaccid and extremely relaxed and the horse is depressed, the central nervous system may be damaged. If any of the signs are observed, a closer inspection is needed.

In order to fully recognize a horse's change in condition, it is a good idea to keep permanent records for each horse in your care. The file should include:

1. Permanent identification, birth date, and registrations
2. Reproductive history, breeding dates, and foaling dates
3. Weight and condition scores
4. Normal temperature (T), pulse (P), and respiration (R), or TPR
5. Deworming dates and products used
6. Vaccination dates, diseases, and products used
7. Illness dates, diagnoses, and treatments
8. Injury dates and treatments
9. Surgery dates and outcomes
10. Allergy causes

Stress can be grouped into four different categories for horses:

1. Behavioral or psychological
2. Mechanical
3. Metabolic
4. Immunological

**Behavioral Stress** – horses do not see the world as we do. They have what is known as monocular vision as well as binocular vision. With the monocular vision, they are able to see to each side of their head, much better than humans. They also have binocular, which allows them to see objects in front of them. However, horses are unable to see approximately 4 ft directly in front of them. Further, horses hear much better than humans. All of these factors can be possible explanations of why they seem to spook easily and without warning on occasion.

When a horse is stressed, he may also show signs of agitation. A horse that is agitated may lay his ears back and swish his tail. This is not to be confused with a horse that is fearful. This horse will clamp its tail down, its body is tense and eyes may be wider than normal.

Horses are known to also feel less stress when around other horses. Even if a horse cannot be in the same pasture as other horses, they will feel more ease when they are able to see other horses that are in close proximity.

**Mechanical Stress** – stress level in horses can also increase greatly when there is some type of structural injury. Examples of this may include: lameness, local inflammation, swelling, heat, and/or pain. Checking for injury or lameness should be a part of the everyday routine for maintenance of your horse. The best time to do this is while feeding in the morning; and again at the evening feeding session.

**Nutrition and Metabolic Stress** – the horse's digestive system is designed to handle frequent meals small meals. Further, when the horse is in a grazing environment, they are better able to maintain optimum health. To reduce stress, horses require that a certain proportion of the diet be roughage. Vitamin and mineral requirements must also be met but not exceeded for the stage and condition of the horse.

Three metabolic problems in horses are closely related with nutrition:

1. Colic
2. Laminitis
3. Tying up

**Immunological Stress** – stress caused by disease and/or parasites can range from superficial discomfort to death. A good vaccination program is the best defense against infectious diseases. Additionally, an effective deworming program must include good management practices as well as regular use of antiparasitic drugs. Some important guidelines include:

- Treat all horses at the same time
- Rotate clean horses to clean pastures
- Design feed and water facilities to prevent fecal contamination
- Remove manure frequently from stalls and paddocks
- Clip and harrow pastures regularly

- Consult with a veterinarian on selection and use of antiparasitic drugs
- Monitor the effectiveness of the parasite control program by checking egg counts in feces

As horse owners, we will never completely be able to keep our horses from becoming stressed. However, with routine checks and awareness, we may be able to manage it. Special thanks to Dr. Rick Parker for his contributions to this article.

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