

## Health and welfare information about your horse from Vetlexicon Equis.



### Vices - why and how to manage them

Horses have to put up with a lot! In years gone by horses were left to roam the plains free to do what they liked. Now they are expected to live in small stables and graze in small, enclosed areas. No wonder they look for other things to do, to occupy themselves. Unfortunately, many of these actions turn into vices which can cause, at times, disastrous effects.

#### What is a vice?

A vice is a form of abnormal behaviour, usually of a destructive kind, that becomes a habit. This behaviour is usually seen in horses kept in confined areas for long periods of time.

#### What sort of vices are there and what can I do about them?

Psychological-related vices:

- **Box walking** - usually caused by boredom. Your horse will continuously walk around his stable in circles. Causes damage to ligaments and joints and fatigue. It is almost impossible to stop, the best solution is to turn your horse out as much as possible. If you do have to stable your horse, make sure he has some form of distraction, eg horseball.
- **Crib-biting** - this is where your horse will grasp the edge of an object, eg top of his stable door, with his incisor teeth and gradually gnaw at it. This slowly wears away the teeth, causing problems with grazing. Crib-biting is usually caused by boredom, but your horse may have copied another horse. This can be avoided by applying unpleasant tasting liquids/pastes to any surface your horse may attempt to crib at. Cribbing collars can also be used.
- **Tail rubbing** - usually a habit left over from a previous experience of parasites. Parasite control is essential. Results in loss of tail hair and damage to the skin. Tail rubbing can be minimised by using a tail bandage/guard/board.
- **Weaving** - this is almost always caused from boredom. Your horse will shift his weight from one front leg to the other, swaying his head and neck from side to side. This condition can vary from very mild, seen only at feeding times, or continuously inside the stable, over the stable door and even when turned-out. This condition is almost impossible to stop, putting strain on joints and tendons and causing abnormal wear to shoes or hooves. Avoid stabling your horse for long periods, if your horse has to be stabled, provide a distraction, eg a companion, slow-release feeding, horseball, plenty of exercise, etc. Contrary to common belief, there is no evidence that horses copy the behaviour, but widespread belief that this may occur, causes owners to isolate these animals, which can only worsen the problem.
- **Windsucking** - can be associated with crib-biting. Your horse will grasp the edge of an object, eg top of his stable door, with his incisor teeth, arch his neck while pulling back and sucking air into the stomach. You will often hear a strange grunting sound too. Windsucking is usually caused by boredom, and an increased frequency of crib-biting is usually seen in grain-fed horses. Make sure your horse doesn't get bored and gets regular exercise. Apply unpleasant tasting liquids/pastes to any surfaces your horse uses to windsuck. Cribbing collars can also be used.
- **Wood chewing** - usually caused by boredom, lack of exercise or nervousness. Wood chewing can also be associated with dental problems, parasites or mineral deficiency. Wood chewing causes abnormal wear of the incisor teeth, causing problems with grazing. Cover any wooden surfaces with metal or rubber sheeting or apply unpleasant tasting liquids/pastes to wooden surfaces. Electric fencing can be used in the field, on the top rail.

Temperament-related vices:

- **Biting** - often associated with stallions. Other, normally gentle horses may bite when groomed in a rough manner or when their girth is tightened when exercised. Also done in self-defense towards other horses or uninvited humans. Ponies will bite at children if they are being harassed! Biting usually stops if the cause is removed. Using a short-sharp smack on a fleshy part of your horse accompanied by a disapproving NO! as soon as he has tried to bite you will help - eventually your horse will respond to your disapproving NO! and hopefully stop completely.
- **Bolting** - this is when a horse decides to gallop off at speed, totally out of control of the rider, without responding to any commands. Bolting is very dangerous for both horse and rider. Check that your horse isn't suffering from any painful, physical problems. Does the saddle fit properly and is his bit comfortable in his mouth? Bolting can also be a result of lack of schooling or bad experiences. Avoid riding in large, open spaces - if you do ride out, go with another horse that is quiet and confident.
- **Kicking** - stabled horses may learn to destroy doors and partitions by kicking continuously. Padding can be used in stables which may stop some kickers. Some impatient horses will only kick at feed time. Horses that have previously been badly treated develop kicking as self-defence. Kicking horses are very dangerous and can be very difficult to handle. Always be careful around the back end of your horse.
- **Rearing** - usually associated with over-excited horses and ponies - in these cases they only lift their front feet off the ground a short distance when they are keen to move forward. Other horses will rear when they are trying to get away from or refusing to do something, eg jumping or passing through enclosed areas. These reasons can usually be overcome by an experienced rider. Other causes, however, may be physical, ie back pain, old injury or a sore mouth. If your horse has no physical problems, then the tack may be causing the problem. Make sure all the tack fits properly. Horses that rear to a point where they unseat the rider or topple over need to be checked over by an expert.

Any other unusual behaviour you see in your horse is usually behaviour-related and not a vice. They may be resolvable and hopefully will not become a habit.

### What else should I consider?

**Diet** - horses tend to get stressed if they are unable to graze, resulting in abnormal behaviour. If you offer your horse high amounts of roughage at frequent intervals, they will always have a full stomach, reducing stress. Feeding a combination of chaff and hay is better than feeding

hay alone as it is similar to what your horse would get if he was grazing.

**Stable environment** - have a look at the design of your horse's stable. If your horse is going to be stabled for long periods, it needs to be comfortable for him. Horses that have a view of other horses are less likely to become bored. Make sure the stable is well ventilated and not dark and dingy. Ensure your horse has a continuous supply of clean, fresh water. Experiment with different types of bedding - your horse may have a preference. Music is a possibility - leave a radio on during the day if there are no other horses in the yard, it will give your horse something to think about!!

**Distractions** - if your horse is stabled for long periods, try and provide some sort of distraction. For horses kept in larger stalls or barns, consider putting another horse or pony, or even donkey in with your horse - horses are very sociable creatures. Other distractions include so called toys. There are many boredom breakers available that just may do the trick. Hang a ball in your horses stable that you can smear with treacle or molasses. You could also hang up carrots and apples or even a flavoured horse lick. All of which will provide hours of fun. Different types of balls are also available that you leave on the floor of the stable - some have handles, so your horse can pick it up and throw it around - some have holes in that contain food that is slowly released as your horse moves it around the floor.

**Surgery** - a rather radical option, but one that can be considered particularly for horses that windsuck or crib-bite to a serious extent. Your horse could have an operation (myectomy) where part of the muscle that controls the movement of the throat when swallowing is removed. This, however, is not always successful and horses are likely to relapse if they have been crib-biting for a long time previously.