



Obsessive Compulsive Disorders in the Horse

Horses, like people, can develop obsessive behaviors and it can dramatically affect their quality of life.

The most common compulsions, otherwise known as stereotypes, include:

- cribbing
- weaving
- stall walking
- pawing
- head bobbing or
- compulsive head movements
- biting/oral fixation
- wall kicking
- aggressive lunging

Some of these behaviors are associated with boredom and some are associated with pain avoidance. Obsessive yawning or tongue movements can be associated with gastric or hind gut ulcers or other abdominal pain. Most of the stereotypic behaviors are functionless, repetitive actions that the horse makes without any known cause. Genetics is thought to play a role in horses that will develop these compulsions but the environment around them will also play a significant role.

Horses that crib (wind sucking, wood biting, breath holding) perform a repetitive action of placing their upper incisors over a solid object, then biting or pulling down on the object while contracting the muscles in the neck responsible for flexing the head/swallowing. Although it was once thought that these horses were intentionally swallowing air, research has shown that these horses do not typically swallow much air and rather suck air into the esophagus and then expel it again.

Animal Facts

Stereotypes in Horses

Occasionally though, some air will get trapped and sucked into the stomach which can result in various types of colic with the worst case scenario being an epiploic foramen entrapment of the small intestine which has been directly related to cribbing behaviors in horses and can be deadly. There have been various treatment methods used to attempt to correct this behavior including medications, alternative medicine modalities, aversion devices and surgical augmentation. A definitive therapy has yet to be devised.

Weaving and stall walking/circling are very common compulsions as well. These horses will obsessively weave back and forth in front of a stall door or circle around their stall repeatedly. Some of the

methods used to control this behavior involves modifying the way these horses are fed to provide them with more time to eat (slow feeding hay bags), various pheromones, medications, placement of mirrors in front of the stall, play balls in the stall and cross-tying the horse. Again, a definitive therapy has yet to be devised.

If you have a horse that has developed one of these types of stereotypes and would like to gain some further information about the diagnosis and potential treatment option, contact your equine veterinarian and they will be happy to help.



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