

Stable vices, also known as stereotypies, are physical movements made by a horse in response to pain, anxiety, or stress. One stable vice is cribbing. When a horse cribs, he grasps a post, bucket or other object with his upper incisors and then gulps air, so this behavior is also sometimes called “windsucking.” The action may release endorphins and provides release for a horse. Once a horse learns to crib, he continues to do it over and over.

Cribbing is more than a behavioral annoyance because it has negative effects on a horse’s health. Aside from wearing out his upper incisor teeth, the changes in abdominal pressure as a horse cribs can predispose him to a certain type of colic: epiploic foramen entrapment. In this type of colic, a portion of the small intestine is sucked into a small slit between the liver and the pancreas, where its blood supply is cut off. This is one of the most severe and devastating types of colic, and surgery is necessary to correct the problem.

Habitual, long-term cribbing results in enlargement of neck muscles, making intravenous injections more difficult and therefore increasing the chances of a problem. For example, I have accidentally hit the carotid artery (rather than the jugular vein) on a cribber, and I know I’m not the veterinarian who has had this problem. When medication is injected into the carotid artery, it causes a seizure. It’s terrifying to see a horse having a seizure, though he usually recovers from the accidental misplacement of medication.

As many as 5% of horses crib, and a cribber may be unwelcome at boarding stables because his habit is destructive. Caretakers also fear that he will teach other horses how to crib, though behavioral research shows that 90% of cribbers learn spontaneously without ever seeing another horse crib. It’s really sad, because cribbing can decrease a horse’s value and his likelihood to stay in a home, even if everything else about him is perfect.

Controlling cribbing takes a multi-faceted behavioral approach. First, any underlying pain or unsoundness should be identified and treated. Next, a horse should be offered more exercise and food in a way that mimics how a wild horse lives. Finally, the cribbing behavior should be physically prevented or discouraged. There are trainers that purport training a horse to not crib, though the end result may be that he learns, “don’t crib while they are looking” rather than “don’t crib.”

Maximizing turnout is the best way of controlling cribbing and keeping a horse mentally healthy. For many horses, this alone will eliminate the behavior. If I had a cribber, he would live outside 100% of the time. Exercise helps satisfy his physiological and psychological need for movement. For a severe case, an electric fence reduces the options of where a horse can crib. Turnout should mimic a horse’s natural environment as much as possible – lots of grazing, lots of moving, and several companion horses. Routine and herd stability are helpful to minimize daily stress and reduce the horse’s desire to crib. If a horse is boarded, managing his cribbing may be especially challenging. Horses come and go from stables, turnout is usually only partially available or not available at all, and you may not have control over how your horse is fed.

When a cribber is stalled, he should have as much access to hay as possible to help reduce boredom-related stress. Forage when stalled should be in a slow-feeder or slow-feed hay net, and in toys or food-dispensers (“food puzzles”).

A cribbing collar (there are several different designs) will help reduce frequency of the cribbing because it mechanically makes the action more difficult. Some horses may need to wear the collar only while in a stall, while others need to wear one all the time. Most people don’t initially adjust them snug enough, so they don’t always work well. Once they are tight enough to work and worn for long enough periods of time to reduce cribbing, they can cause pressure sores. A horse may end up with skin problems or white hair underneath, despite every effort to pad and adjust the cribbing collar.

Calming supplements may help reduce cribbing behavior, though few are science-supported. It’s unlikely that a supplement alone will eliminate cribbing. Zylkene has research backing its efficacy for calming a horse. CBD may also be worth a try, though no research support exists. Antipsychotic medications like trazodone or Xanax have been tried on horses for other reasons. There are disadvantages to these drugs: they cannot be given to horses that are showing, are expensive, and have to be given to a horse daily for the rest of his life to continue to work.

A last resort is a surgical procedure to cut a nerve in a horse’s neck so he will no longer be able to use his neck muscles to crib. Like other denervation procedures, you want to enlist a competent surgeon. Effectiveness of the surgery may last from six months to many years. One study showed the procedure eliminated cribbing for a one-year follow-up time on 72 of 90 horses.¹

If your horse is a cribber, keep trying management tweaks, and be in it for the long haul. Leaving the problem alone is likely to result in it getting worse over time.

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