

Needs and Natural Behaviours of Horses

Understanding Your Horse's Natural Needs and Behaviour

Even though horses and ponies have been domesticated, their needs remain surprisingly similar to those of their wild ancestors. By tuning into their natural behaviours, you can help ensure your horse or pony is happy and healthy while in your care.

Did you know that horses have been evolving for over 55 million years? They've only been part of our lives for about 4,000 to 6,000 years, which is a blink of an eye in evolutionary terms! Because of this short time frame, they still carry many traits from their wild days. As beloved companions, however, we often expect them to adapt to lifestyles that don't align with their inherent needs.

Where Should You Keep Your Horse?



In the wild, horses live in family groups that typically include a stallion, several mares, and their offspring. They can also form bachelor groups of young males or stallions without mares. Horses thrive in open spaces, like fields or paddocks. When confined to small areas, such as a stable, they can experience something called “rebound.” This happens when they've been unable to move freely for too long, causing them to exhibit flighty behaviors like cantering, bucking, or rearing once they finally get a chance to move. They might also start biting if they can't graze.

Having group housing, like a barn or a sheltered outdoor area, is a fantastic way to give horses more space and allow them to socialise, munch together, and groom one another. This social interaction is crucial for their well-being because, as prey animals, they feel more secure when they're around other horses.

Introducing Your Horse to New Environments

When introducing your horse to a new area for exercise, it's essential to take things slow. Gradual introductions help your horse feel safe, especially if you can bring along a horse buddy. This way, they can build positive associations with the new space, which is vital for future training or riding sessions.

The Social Nature of Horses

Horses are incredibly social creatures. If a horse is injured and has to be confined, having a companion can make a world of difference in their comfort level. Studies show that horses kept alone in confinement experience higher levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. In contrast, horses that can see and interact with each other, even just through a stable wall, have lower stress levels. Mutual grooming is another beautiful way horses bond, helping to strengthen their friendships while keeping their coats healthy.



How Do Horses Eat?

In their natural habitat, horses graze for about 14 to 18 hours a day. To keep your horse healthy, it's important to mimic this natural grazing behaviour. Horses produce gastric acid continuously, so if they go too long without food, they can develop ulcers. Plus, they prefer to eat and drink near other horses, as they've evolved in open grasslands where they relied on each other to spot potential predators. So, it's best to

provide plenty of fibre-rich food throughout the day to keep them happy and healthy!



Sleep Patterns of Horses

Adult horses typically need between two to five hours of sleep each day. They can doze while standing, thanks to a special locking mechanism in their legs. However, they need to lie down flat for about 30 minutes of REM sleep, which they usually take in small chunks over 24 hours. As prey animals, they remain cautious while sleeping, often relying on another horse to act as a lookout. If a horse can't get enough REM sleep, it may suffer from sleep deprivation, making that lookout support vital.



Exercise is Essential

Horses need to move! When grazing, they munch around their front feet, then take a step forward to continue eating. In the wild, they can travel up to 30 kilometres a day in search of food and water. They also enjoy playing and running with their herd

mates. This playtime is crucial for their social development and helps them learn and



bond.

Creating Enrichment for Your Horse

Providing enriching environments for your horse can be a lot of fun! You can set up areas with different herbs for them to smell, objects for scratching, or wood to chew on —bark actually makes up about 10% of their natural diet. Different surfaces and heights to explore also add to their enrichment. Safe, new objects can spark curiosity and encourage exploration.

Breeding Considerations

In the wild, both male and female horses are naturally inclined to breed. That's why many male horses are gelded (castrated) to help them live peacefully with mares. If a stallion is kept intact, it's crucial to keep him separated from mares to avoid any surprises! Mares typically go into season from spring to fall.



The Importance of Veterinary Care

While horses didn't always have access to veterinary care, it's essential for their overall health today. Regular check-ups from a vet or farrier ensure that your horse receives the care and treatment needed for a long, happy life.