



HEAD SHAKING SYNDROME

Head shaking syndrome is one of the most mysterious and frustrating problems in horses. There are a small number of articles published on the internet that describe basic head shaking; however the list of published veterinary literature is not exhaustive.

After accepting a rescue horse showing signs of chronic head shaking syndrome, I started researching what it is and the treatment available. Many internet articles gave numerous (about 50) causes for head shaking which included chiropractic issues, poorly fitting tack, insects, sunlight, allergies, vaccinations and so on and while they were quick to point out the causes they didn't have any information on treatment or cure.

What is head shaking syndrome? All horses will shake their head at one point or another mostly horizontally, but horses showing symptoms of head shaking syndrome shake their head vertically in a repetitive non voluntary manner. This motion is sudden and violent; an intense flick of the nose, head and in some cases the neck. The symptoms of head shaking include, but are not limited to vertical head shaking, snorting, sneezing and rubbing their face on fences, walls and their legs.

Veterinarians have linked head shaking to irritation or inflammation of the trigeminal nerve which runs from the back of the head, around the ears, along both sides of the face and stops in the nose/muzzle. They liken the sensation to an electric shock type impulse which is painful, therefore causing the horses head to violently and involuntarily jerk vertically and in extreme cases, causing the horse to hit its head trying to avoid the pain.

Many experts say that Equine Head Shaking Syndrome is a very similar condition to Trigeminal Neuralgia in people. This condition is also called suicide syndrome and is described as the most painful condition known, resulting in many people taking their own lives.

There are universities in the UK and the USA who have begun systematic research into head shaking syndrome, however it's still poorly understood. What we do know is that there isn't one single cause. Horses can start head shaking and then go into remission before starting again and head shaking can be seasonal.

What is causing your horse's head shaking? First you will need to establish whether your horse's head shaking is neurotic behaviour or an expression to resistance to training.

Physically induced head shaking is different from behavioural head shaking and should be handled differently. It is an uncontrollable head shake in response to pain and doesn't vary whether the horse is under saddle or not. It looks like the horse is having a massive

allergy attack and in severe cases the horse will become unrideable, unmanageable and even dangerous. At this point you should call your vet to make a diagnosis and to rule out other causes and suggest a treatment plan.

You will need to establish whether your tack might be causing your horse physical pain. Have a professional saddle fitter come out and inspect your tack. If your horse is still head shaking, then check to see if he improves if you keep him indoors and then take him out into the sun again. If this causes him to start head shaking than your horse might be a photic head shaker. Keep a diary of your horse's behaviour and always consult your veterinarian for advice.

Treatment:

Currently there is no cure for head shaking and in some cases it can lay dormant in a horse for years. Horses can even go into remission with no sign of head shaking and then one day it will come back again.

There are a number of things you can do to make your horse more comfortable once you establish the cause.

UV protection face mask with the full nose flap can help to shade your horse from bright lights and protect his nose from dust and insects. It is best left on 24/7 in spring and summer but make sure your horse is in a safe paddock or stall where he can't run into fences or hurt himself.

Herbal treatment targeting respiratory allergies, immune problems and calming herbs can help reduce the symptoms and it is best to consult a professional equine herbalist for advice. Homeopathic treatment can also help and includes injections, small pills and drops which are put into the horses feed. As the founder of Save a Horse Australia Horse Rescue and Sanctuary, I have used herbal treatments and homeopathic treatments (heal with ease) with great success. I also suggest physical treatments such as chiropractic, Bowen therapy, myofunctional therapy, equivibe sessions or any other kind of physical therapy.

Save a Horse Australia Horse Rescue and Sanctuary Head Shakers:

Brandy was surrendered with a chronic skin condition and was a head shaker. Her symptoms were not manageable and she became a danger to herself and the people handling her. Brandy's head shaking was established to be a neurological defect and during an attack she would panic and run into things causing herself some horrific injuries. She was euthanized after 11 months of treatment.

Mishka was surrendered in winter 2010 without showing any signs of head shaking. However, in spring 2010 and after one of the new rescue horses stressed her by chasing her around, she started to develop mild symptoms. It was a process of elimination but after a chiropractic session, myofunctional therapy and a vet appointment, it was established that Mishka was a photic head shaker. We started using a UV fly mask with a nose flap on her all of the time and her symptoms stopped.

No two horses are the same in their cause and symptoms. Head shaking should always be assessed by a professional veterinarian first and foremost, before trying the process of elimination to establish what will work for your horse and what won't.

If you are going to go down the track of consulting natural therapist, make sure they are also professionally qualified.

This article is not a substitute for professional veterinarian advice.

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