

10 things we do that puzzle and scare horses

July 31 2020, by Paul McGreevy, Cathrynne Henshall



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Horses, like our dogs and cats, are familiar to many of us, be they racehorses, police horses, or much-loved pony club mounts. So it might surprise you that horses, in Australia, are [more deadly than snakes](#), and indeed all venomous animals combined.

An equine veterinarian is [more at risk](#) of workplace injury than a firefighter. Does [horses'](#) apparent familiarity lead us to misinterpret or misunderstand their behavior?

Some of our interactions with horses [correspond to interactions between horses themselves](#). Giving our horse a scratch on an itchy spot or allowing them to rub their head against us, while [frowned on by some trainers](#), mimics how horses [behave together](#).

But there are many other interactions which, from the horse's perspective, are unusual or downright rude.

The culture clash between horses and humans can trigger defense or flight responses that can leave us badly injured. Here are ten common challenges we present to horses:

1. Invasive veterinary care

There are many veterinary practices we impose on horses to keep them healthy. Some of them, such as injecting or suturing, are invasive or painful. Horses' natural reaction to pain is to flee. If they can't, they may resort to aggression, such as biting or kicking.

Horses don't know veterinary treatments are meant to help them, and hence [vets who treat horses are at more risk of injury](#) than those treating other species. Equine vets sustain [more workplace injuries](#) than construction workers or firefighters.

2. Patting them

Many horse people routinely pat their horses as a reward [for a job well done](#). But horses have not evolved to find this rewarding. They don't pat each other—instead, they scratch or gently nibble each other as a [form of bonding](#).

A [recent study](#) showed patting increased horses' heart rates, whereas

scratching lowered them and was associated with behavioral signs of relaxation and enjoyment.



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3. Picking up feet, hoof trimming and shoeing

An important task in horse-keeping is hoof care through regular cleaning, trimming or shoeing. This requires us to pick up a horse's foot and hold it aloft for several minutes. This practice of immobilizing the hoof restricts the horse's ability to flee if it perceives a threat, which may be why many horses [find hoof-handling stressful](#). Training a horse to accept having its feet and legs held requires patience to prevent injury to both the horse and the handler.

4. Grooming sensitive areas

Horses in groups regularly groom each other, favoring areas that aren't sensitive or ticklish. We like to groom our [horses all over](#). Grooming the sensitive groin, inguinal and perineal regions is likely to be unpleasant for horses. This may account for the tail-swishing, agitation [and even biting of the handler](#) often seen when people groom these taboo areas.

5. Pulling or clipping hairs and whiskers

Many horse owners like to impose strict order on their horses' body hair, including pulling out "excess" hair from the mane and tail, and trimming or removing body hair, facial whiskers and the [protective hair inside the ears](#). These activities are [frequently resented](#) by horses. Some [European countries have banned whisker trimming](#) altogether because of the importance of whiskers to horses in detecting the proximity of surfaces

and foraging outside their field of view.

6. Spraying them with chemicals such as flyspray

Spraying fly repellent is common enough for many humans. But it creates a strange noise and may also be perceived as [aversive](#) when it lands on sensitive skin. The strong scent of the chemicals can also be aversive to horses, given their highly [sensitive sense of smell](#). Patient training is often needed to counter-condition horses so they stand quietly while being sprayed.

7. Feeding by hand or from a bucket

As grazers, horses do not feed each other (except when nursing foals) and in free-roaming situations, aggression over food is rare. In contrast, food aggression is often [seen in domestic horses](#). We provide highly palatable foods and treats that can bring out unwelcome behaviors because horses are highly motivated to eat these foods.

Some learn to mug their carers, for example by knocking the feed bucket out of their hands. In such a situation, crime really does pay and the horse can swiftly learn to repeat the behavior. Of course, the horse's confusion increases and its welfare plummets if it is punished for this.



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8. Putting them in a trailer or horse box

Horses are claustrophobic and have 320° vision, so our practice of loading them into dark, narrow spaces with unstable footing, such as into trailers (floats) and horse boxes, is often a challenge for a species that has evolved to avoid such spaces. Difficulties with loading and with dangerous behaviors during transport [are routinely reported](#). These responses are generally manifestations of panic and include rushing off the trailer and pulling back when tied up.

9. Branding

Searing a permanent mark onto the skin of horses is often required for identification purposes. The use of super-cooled brands or firebrands is unpleasant because they cause a third-degree burn and require the horse to be restrained, either in [stocks](#) or via chemical sedation. Thankfully, less invasive methods of identification, such as microchipping, are gaining increasing acceptance among breed and competition societies.

10. Stabling and other forms of isolation

Putting horses in stables might seem benign, and many horses voluntarily enter stables because that is where they are fed. But stabling prevents horses from engaging in most of their [grazing and social behaviors](#). Horses rarely voluntarily isolate themselves from other horses, and prolonged social isolation can lead to behavioral problems such as

separation distress, rug-chewing and stereotyped behaviors such as weaving and stall-walking.

If you'd like to benchmark your horse or pony against thousands of others that we have gathered data on, consider using the [Equine Behavior Assessment Research Questionnaire](#). Understanding why horses find so many procedures unpleasant, frightening or painful is the first step to cutting them some much-needed slack.

They do not defend themselves out of malice but from fear. Taking a walk in their hooves allows us to make them happier and safer to be around.

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Citation: 10 things we do that puzzle and scare horses (2020, July 31) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-07-puzzle-horses.html>

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