



Horse Cribbing and Wind Sucking

A cribbing horse anchors their upper front teeth onto a stationary object, such as a fence, arches up their neck and facial muscles, retracts their larynx (voice box), and then gulps down air. A wind sucker on the other hand will flex their neck, gulp air and emit a grunting sound without anchoring onto an object.

Horses who crib can wear their teeth excessively, may suffer from colic because of swallowing air and their performance could be impeded by the heavy neck muscles which develop from cribbing. In addition to these health concerns, a considerable amount of damage is caused to stalls and barns.

Cribbing and wind sucking have not been reported in free-ranging wild or semi-wild horses who spend ninety percent of their time grazing.

Our domestic horses, on the other hand, typically spend much less time grazing and their inability to graze naturally can be a significant stress that might contribute to cribbing behaviour. Looking at it from a different angle, cribbing is also thought to be motivated by boredom or attempts to satisfy their natural grazing instinct with substitute behaviour.

Research has shown that this repetitive behaviour may cause the release of endorphins which are opioid like substances which have a "feel good" effect and can become addictive to some horses. It has been found that drugs which block the body's release of endorphins can stop cribbing but these drugs are relatively short acting.

Drugs, aversion therapies (crib straps, anti-cribbing mixes applied to fences, electric fencing) and surgery to stop the behaviour do not address the root of the problem. As always if we fail to respect natural principles, sooner or later problems will develop to reflect the imbalance.

If your horse is confined to a stall, provide toys that it can roll over to obtain food. Also remove crib-friendly objects from the stall and position stall features to reduce the opportunity for cribbing eg. Raise the water bucket and feed tub up to chest level and eliminate all edges up to that height.

Ideally allow horses more pasture time, letting them graze (on well balanced soils) and roam, as well as social interaction with other horses and even other species. This in addition to consistent, intelligent handling as well as regular exercise will help tremendously.

Good nutrition is vital to having your horse feeling good within them self. Feed less grain concentrate (use higher-fat rations if necessary) and more roughage (forage supplements). Also ensure that they have optimal amounts of vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids in their diet.

Be aware that underlying pain due to ulcers, sore teeth or for other reasons will raise the need for a horse to crib. If you suspect this might be the case, get them to be checked over by your vet and have these problems addressed.

Horses who have been cribbing for years may have the habit so deeply ingrained that it could be difficult to have absolute resolution but by respecting natural principles and addressing all factors that could possibly be contributing to underlying stress, cribbing can be greatly reduced or completely eliminated.