

# THE NERVOUS HORSE

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“Horses have been enveloped in human dreams, myths, ambitions, and sentiment for so long that the story we think of as theirs is often but a distorted reflection of our own desires, and then not always our most noble desires.” (2)

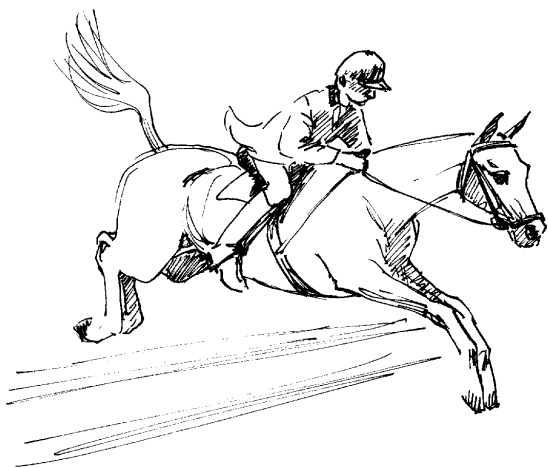
No matter whether you ride horses just for the love of them or whether you are trying to win an Olympic Gold Medal, our horses are always to a certain extent a reflection of ourselves. With their highly developed flight instinct, they are particularly sensitive to their environment, including the human beings they come into contact with.

As riders and handlers of horses we influence their behaviour more than we realise. This is especially true in relation to their nervous system. The first thing we need to understand is that horses do not think, see, smell, hear or perceive things the way we do. To understand the genetic hardwired behaviour of horses, I highly recommend Stephen Budiansky's book "The Nature of Horses". Once we have grasped the facts in relation to equine behaviour, especially their nervous reactions, we are well on the way to building a harmonious partnership with our horses.

However, horses, like people, will show nervous discontent in particular body areas. There are four main types - those who react in the gut, the skin, the heart or the lungs. They can also be more than one type.

In horses those who show nervous reactions in the gut do so typically by way of loose manure, an excessive number of droppings and sometimes excessive numbers of urinations. These horses can also internalise stress into the gut which if not corrected often manifests as gut ulceration and scouring.

The skin reactors are prone to itchiness, scratching and skin problems. Horses who react in the heart usually adrenalise easily, often taking a long time for the elevated heart rate to



return to normal. Those who react in the lungs tend to be horses who do not breathe deeply and regularly while being ridden.

The heart and lung reactors in particular present training and fitness difficulties.

If a horse's nervous system is not balanced, this impairs performance in the sport horse and inhibits enjoyment of the pleasure horse. Obviously the causes of the imbalance need to be discovered and rectified as part of any treatment.

Causes of nervous system imbalances range from inherited behaviour to intolerance of feeds, training methods, riders, handlers, occupation, environment and imbalances in other body systems.

It is surprising how many owners will say "Oh her mother did that as well". I was treating a show hack recently who had a fixation with foals and small horses. She had no apparent hormonal problems and I told the owner I thought it would be pretty difficult to change her obsessive behaviour. As it turned out the combination of herbs and Bach flower essences I chose for her did work and quite quickly. It was only afterwards that the owner discovered and reported to me that the dam of this mare had been the same!

Differentiating soundness and behavioural problems is usually one of the first steps in deciding how to treat apparent nervousness. The main reason humans are able (or in some cases unable) to train horses is the phenomenal memory of the equine species. All the good horsemen know how to use this fact to their advantage. So depending upon each horse's

individual degree of sensitivity (temperament), they are a product of what has happened to them in their handling (or mishandling) by man. So whilst actual pain in varying degrees is often the cause of behavioural problems, often it is only the memory of pain associated with bad handling and rough "training" that produces an ongoing nervousness. One stark example of bad handling which stays with horses for life to some degree or other is the practice of giving a shock from a battery (usually to get them out of the barriers).

Treating the memory of pain is where the Bach flower essences in particular often produce astoundingly good results. They are also used for symptomatic treatment in conjunction with nervine herbs which ameliorate symptoms and treat the underlying causes at the same time. Girthiness is a very good example of a problem which can in a mild form be from the memory of pain but is usually from a physical cause. These include unsoundness in the wither, spine and ribs or discomfort coming from the liver and sometimes also the spleen.

Overstimulation of nerve fibres can produce acid wastes in the body and many nervous horses who appear cranky as well as being generally sore are a victim of this problem, usually worsened by inappropriate feeding.

It will be seen from the foregoing that treating a horse for nervousness is not simply a matter of feeding them a few nervine herbs. As with any condition, the whole horse must be evaluated and treated at the same time, to have any chance of successful re-balancing, with the horse ultimately being maintained on a natural diet.

Obviously though, a selection from the nervine herbs will always be part of a mixture for nervous system balancing. There are seven nervine herbs which I use for horses. They are Chamomile, Vervain, Valerian, Mugwort, Skullcap, Hops and Passiflora. I only ever use the nervine herb St Johns Wort externally as part of a treatment for skin conditions.

## *CHAMOMILE*

This herb is specific for the gut reactors and the skin reactors. Any horse which shows loose manure to any degree when nervous is a candidate for Chamomile. Also any horse which reacts easily on the skin to insect bites, flies, ticks or simply from pressure is also in need of Chamomile. This herb is readily available and can very safely be added to the feed by horse owners. One handful flowers of Chamomile twice daily for the average sized horse can be added to the feed straight or made into a tea to extract the medicinal qualities more fully and the whole lot added.



## *VERVAIN*

This herb is for the skin reactor which shows up as itchininess, sensitivity to biting insects, rashes, lumps, sores etc. Also typically the horse in need of Vervain often sweats excessively when nervous and may also tremble or even shake. They may also be impatient, fiddly, fussy and their veins may stand out when they are nervous. Very often these horses are over-conscientious, but use up too much nervous energy before they really need to, say before a race or a competition, so that they haven't got enough fuel left in the tank when it is needed. Vervain is often part of the answer to this kind of nervous temperament.

## *VALERIAN*

This herb is also for the gut reactors. But for those horses that react in the opposite way to the Chamomile horse, by holding their muscles tightly which in turn has a tightening affect on the internal organs including the intestines. These

horse are literally “uptight” and typically have manure which is much too hard, tight muscles and a tucked up gut. They may also be prone to tying-up. They may have difficulties in passing manure because of this and may be prone to impaction colic. Valerian has the affect of allowing the horse to relax his whole body after work but to use himself correctly when asked to work, so that ultimately he lets down in the gut. It is contra-indicated for horses that are prone to loose manure or scouring. Valerian is widely used as a sedative for competition horses and is on the swabbing list. It is contra-indicated for horses which have loose manure as a result of nervousness as it will make them worse. Competitors should not regard Valerian as a quick fix for a nervous problem.

## *PASSIFLORA*

This is a very good herb to use as part of a mixture for horses who are generally anxious, apprehensive and never seem to be at ease. I use it a lot for mares, including those who are also being treated for hormonal problems.

## *MUGWORT*

Mugwort is specific for horses who are extremely sensitive and are usually over reactive to some or all of the following stimuli - sight, sound, touch, smell, light, wind and even barometric pressure. Chestnuts, especially Thoroughbreds, while I love them dearly, seem to be prime candidates to benefit from Mugwort!

## *HOPS*

Hops is excellent as part of a mixture when help is needed

to reshape nervous attitudes and old habits. It is excellent for those horses whose heart rates rise noticeably when they are stressed, but who recover quite quickly from these episodes. An old fashioned remedy to calm an excited horse was to give them some beer and Hops are an important ingredient in beermaking!

## ***SKULLCAP***

Professional advice should be sought for the use of this herb, as its indications are extremely specific and dosage rates are critical. I use it only as part of a mixture for horses who consistently and seriously over-adrenalise and who do not recover quickly from this nervous state. Their heart rates go up and stay up until the adrenaline works its way out.

All herbs including the nervine herbs have many other beneficial properties.

Nervine herbs work best when given in a mixture with a selection of appropriate Bach flower essences as well as a selection of other herbs to treat the whole horse. All aspects of the horse's metabolism must be brought into balance for a treatment for nervous system problems to be permanently effective. Treatment should be continuous over a full blood cycle (12 weeks) to achieve the best results.

## ***THE NERVOUS RIDER***

The influence of the rider on the nervous behaviour of a horse should always be considered as part of the equation. Most thinking riders are aware of the sensitivity of the horse in this regard. For nervous riders, a mixture of Bach flower essences can be



chosen to help them relax and perform better. These benefits flow through to the horse and improves the quality and harmony of the partnership of horse and rider.

There are times when a change of trainer, rider or occupation is the only answer to chronic nervousness. The same horse that was a nervous wreck or a demon with one rider or trainer can be a happy chappy with a different trainer or rider.

Two stories of racehorses illustrate this point overwhelmingly. One was a horse with a history of chronic gut ulceration. He was completely healed until he went back to the trainer who had him when his problems started. Another is a story of a racehorse who was being trained by his owners. They were with the horse in the stables on a raceday when the horse heard his previous trainer speaking loudly at the far end of the line. The horse immediately broke out in a sweat and started shaking.

## ***CONDITIONS OF THE NERVOUS SYSTEM***

### STRINGHALT

In Australia, Stringhalt is apparently caused from horses ingesting toxins associated with grazing of certain pasture weeds - namely Capeweed and Catsear also known as Flatweed or false Dandelion (*Hypochoeris radicans*). The toxins affect the long nerves in the body. This results in an exaggerated flexion of one or both hind legs, which can be so severe that the front of the fetlock can hit the belly, or the signs may be quite mild. Mild cases are often more noticeable if the horse is asked to back up, or if there is a change of terrain, the weather is cold or if the horse becomes nervously excited for any reason. Although the symptoms of Stringhalt and Locking Patella are not the same, there can be confusion, so it is best to have the condition diagnosed by an expert equine veterinarian, as treatment is quite different.

Stringhalt can also result in partial paralysis of the voice box so that the horse becomes a “roarer”. Horses with stringhalt can walk, canter and gallop quite well but they cannot trot properly. Seasonal conditions and copper and magnesium deficiencies in the soil also appear to play a role in its occurrence.

If Stringhalt is suspected the first thing to do is immediately remove the horse from the pasture, administer Rescue Remedy, feed a plain diet of good quality meadow hay and add high grade dolomite to drinking water at the rate of one handful to 10 litres. Do not confine the horse but allow it to move about as it wishes.

I have treated many horses for stringhalt, the majority of them successfully. In my experience the quicker treatment starts, the better the results. I use a combination of nervine and detoxification herbs as well as Bach flower essences. Two of the most useful nervine herbs in helping to resolve Stringhalt are Valerian for symptomatic relief and Mugwort to help repair the nerve signals. The horses that have not responded to treatment have either been chronic cases afflicted for long periods of time or horses which have apparently not been grazing on either capeweed or catsear. Horses left untreated in any way will become afflicted with muscle wastage. It is important to understand the difference between catsear or false dandelion (*Hypochaeris radicans*) and the true dandelion (*Taraxacum Officinale*) - see List of Useful Herbs.

Obviously the best option for prevention of Stringhalt is pasture management to balance the minerals in the soil and prevent the growth of these plants.

If a serious condition of the nervous system is suspected, such as Wobbler’s Syndrome, consult an expert equine veterinarian for a diagnosis.

