



# U of M Horse Newsletter

Providing research-based information to Minnesota Horse Owners

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## Equine Compulsive Behaviors By: Margaret Duxbury, DVM, U of M

Compulsive or ‘stereotypic’ behaviors are repetitive behaviors that serve no apparent function and occupy a significant portion of an animal’s time. Common examples include crib biting and weaving. These problems are frustrating for horse owners. As a result, they have often been categorized as ‘vices’, a label that implies some fault or failing on the part of the horse. In reality, compulsive behaviors usually begin when there is something ‘wrong’ with the horse’s environment. Compulsive behaviors are not seen in feral, free ranging horses. In natural settings, horses graze 16-19 hours per day consuming a wide variety of plants. They chew greater than 30,000 bites per day, walking a few steps after every bite or two. They live together in relatively stable social groups exchanging an enormous amount of social information via subtle non-verbal mechanisms including touch, smell and visual changes in body posture and facial expression. The horse’s ability to cover long distances per day and to respond to refined social signals suits them well to our domestic needs. But it’s a ‘package deal’. The very same genes that enable horses to thrive on

training and competition will tell them to move a certain amount per day, to forage and chew, and to form social bonds with other equines. Highly managed environments may not allow this. Some horses adapt to a restricted environment with out apparent problem. Others seem compelled to do what nature tells them – and this becomes the basis for the development of compulsive behaviors. A horse that repeatedly grabs a stationary object with its front teeth, pulls back and makes a grunting noise is said to be crib-biting.

Figure 1: A cribbing pony



Horses kept in stalls with limited access to other horses, and horses fed low forage diets are more likely to crib bite. Since satiety is tied to chewing in horses, cribbing may be an attempt to satisfy a severe case of ‘the munchies’ brought on by having too little to chew. Horses fed high concentrate diets are also at increased risk of cribbing. In one study, foals fed concentrates after weaning developed crib biting four times as often as

those that were not. High concentrate diets increase gastric acidity and the risk of ulcers – which can increase the risk colic. There are anecdotal reports that some horses with gastric ulcers may be more likely to crib or do things like eat dirt, however, this has not been proven in research. Equine saliva acts as a buffer to neutralize stomach acids. In horses, the sight or smell of food does not trigger salivation – but chewing does – and cribbing may too. Cribbing horses do not actually swallow air as previously believed. While owners are often concerned that one horse may learn to crib from watching another, this has not been documented, though cribbing may well arise in several horses under similar management. A weaving horse repeatedly shifts its neck and its weight from side to side. Weaving is often triggered in situations where the horse would like to move or follow other horses but is prevented by a barrier. The incidence of weaving in stalled horses may be decreased when horses can see and touch other horses from multiple sides.

Treatments and prevention of these behaviors will be discussed in the next newsletter.

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### Up Coming Events

[www.extension.umn.edu/horse](http://www.extension.umn.edu/horse)

#### REGIONAL HORSE OWNER PROGRAMS

**February 10th, 2007**  
**SESSION FULL**

College of Vet Medicine

**February 17th, 2007**

Crookston, MN

UMC Horse Facility

**February 24th, 2007**

Rochester, MN

Heintz Center

**March 10th, 2007**

Foley, MN

Foley School

**March 24th, 2007**

Cloquet, MN

Cloquet Forestry Center

Pre-registration is required for all programs and registration is limited.

On-line registration is available at: [www.cvm.umn.edu/outreach](http://www.cvm.umn.edu/outreach).

The cost to attend each program is \$35/person which includes lunch and printed materials.

For more information visit [www.extension.umn.edu/horse](http://www.extension.umn.edu/horse) or contact Kristi at 888-241-0719 with questions or to register by mail.



## When to Call Your Vet: Breeding & Foaling

By: Erin Malone, DVM, U of M

If you own a horse used for breeding or manage a breeding farm, there are certain things you should check for after each use, particularly with natural cover. Call your veterinarian if the stallion has: blood on the penis, damage to the penis, a swollen scrotum and/or colic. While you wait, safely try to figure out where the blood is from (the mare needs to be checked also), take vital signs that you are

comfortable with, and if the penis is out, apply cold water using the hose. Mares foal very quickly and forcefully. This means if the foal isn't positioned exactly correctly it can rapidly lead to problems, including the death of the foal. Foaling monitors are very useful to be able to identify mares in the process of foaling. Call your veterinarian if your mare is foaling and you see: only one hoof, an upside down hoof, only the nose, a red bag, the water broke and

no foal has appeared within 20 minutes, the mare made progress but then stopped for greater than 10 minutes, or the mare colics after delivery. While you wait and if it is safe, wrap the mare's tail, clean the mare's vulva with mild soap and water, open the membranes if the foal is visible or if you see a thick red sac, and -keep the placenta, which should be passed within 3 hours. Foals are very delicate and need careful and quick attention if

everything isn't just right. Call your veterinarian if the foal has severe diarrhea, is lethargic or depressed, is not sucking, is not standing within 3 hours, starts to nurse but then seems to forget how, has swollen joint(s), is born greater than 1 week prior to its due date, or if it isn't allowed to nurse by its dam. While you wait milk out the mare if it's safe to do so and keep the foal quiet if it's premature.

According to the most recent Census of Agriculture, which is conducted every five years, the growth in numbers of horse farms far outpaced that of either beef cattle or other types of crop and livestock farms. The Census of Agriculture defines a horse farm as a USDA farm that generates 50 percent or more of its sales from horses. A USDA farm is an operation that sells at least \$1,000 of agricultural products in a year. Riding stables and other equestrian

## USDA Census of Agriculture Results Released

recreational facilities could be counted in the Census if these operations sell horses and operate like a farm. The increase in horse farms is largely attributed to the growth in participation in equestrian sports and recreation. Horse sports, including show jumping, driving, cutting, roping, eventing, and dressage, have expanded their appeal. It is believed that horse farms tend to locate near major population centers. At the

same time, horse farming may be particularly compatible as a peri-urban agricultural activity. Horse operations with pasture and sporting facilities provide open space, consistent with the land-use objectives of many suburban jurisdictions. Horse farms also provide income to other farms and to a variety of agriculture-related businesses. The number of farms operated primarily by women more than doubled since 1978, the

first year that such information was recorded. The significance of women in horse farming is far higher than in other types of farming. By 2002, women were the primary operators of almost a third of all U.S. horse farms. Women farmers, operated over 65% of all horse farms, compared with 37% of all farms. Of all the farms operated primarily by women, 1/5 were horse farms.

**Q:** I'm having trouble with ice in my horse paddocks. How can I remove the ice?

**A:** Ice is a problem in horse paddocks as falls and slips can lead to serious injury. The best solution is to remove the horse from the paddock, until the ice melts, but few horse owners have that option. Sand can be helpful to increase traction.

## Ask the Expert By: Malone & Wilson, DVMs, U of M

However, it is ideal to not feed the horses in the area where the sand is spread to minimize the risk of ingestion. Straight salt can speed the melting of the ice if temperatures are not too cold. There is no research documenting the effect of salt on horse hooves, but pure salt should be used in

moderation as a precaution. If using pure salt to melt ice, make sure the horses have an alternative source of salt to reduce ingestion off the ground. A mixture of sand and salt should not be used in horse paddocks due to the chance of horses accidentally ingesting the sand via their interest in the

salt. Other options like shavings, hay, and straw tend to slide over ice and do not provide additional traction. Small rocks can provide traction, but can be accidentally ingested or become lodged in hooves. To reduce water/ice in the future, improve the grade, install gutters on the barn, and reduce the amount of manure in the paddock.