

Fact Sheet

Equine Aggression

What is aggression?

Aggression is primarily a form of communication used to establish precedence and consists of threats or harmful actions directed towards an individual. Horses in the wild show very little overt physical aggression as they normally live in stable social groups. When they do occur, aggressive encounters are normally short-lived and end with one individual retreating away from the situation.

Broadly speaking, aggression occurs when a horse perceives some form of threat to itself or when frustrated. Horses are not maliciously aggressive, although some medical problems can result in severe aggressive behaviour. It is important to differentiate aggression from potentially similar looking behaviours which can cause injury such as play fighting, nipping and overzealous grooming behaviour.

Aggression can be subdivided into type based on:

- target, e.g. owner or horse directed
- body postures (offensive and defensive)
- the focus of competition, e.g. food related
- the involvement of disease, e.g. pain related,
- the hormonal status of the animal involved, e.g. maternal aggression



These terms are merely contextual cues which help clarify the circumstances of the behaviour. It is important to appreciate that, in most cases, a horse is behaving aggressively because it perceives some form of threat to itself (this may be real or imaginary) and has no opportunity to escape from the situation.



Are aggressive horses normal?

Aggressive behaviours are usually “normal”, but when they result in human or animal injury, the behaviour is dangerous and unacceptable. Human safety must always be a primary consideration when discussing aggression.

Some aggression may have abnormal components to it and be the direct result of disease or experience and learning. A thorough medical examination is essential in any case of aggression to determine if any health problems, or pain is involved.

It is normal for a horse to resist stimulation of a painful focus, and if the preliminary threats are not recognised, the horse may appear to behave aggressively quite suddenly as it learns that mild threats are ignored. Tack should also be examined to check for its potential to cause pain when in contact with the horse, e.g. an ill-fitting saddle.

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What are the signs of pain-induced aggression?

Pain-induced aggression is usually elicited by some form of handling or contact that elicits pain or discomfort. However, even if your horse is not exhibiting pain, many medical conditions can make a horse more irritable and perhaps more prone to aggression. Fear and anxiety further confound many of these cases. If your horse learns that aggression is successful at removing the stimulus, aggression may recur when similar situations arise in the future, whether or not the pain is still present.

Is there any treatment for an aggressive horse?

Treatment first requires that the medical or painful condition is resolved; this may require the attention of both a vet and other qualified veterinary professionals, such as a physiotherapist, as the focus is something quite difficult to determine. Then, you should identify the types of handling and situations that have led to aggression in the past.

With desensitisation and counter-conditioning, your horse can slowly and gradually be accustomed to accept and enjoy these situations. Once the horse learns that there is no more discomfort associated with the handling, but that there may be rewards, the problem should be resolved.

Why is my horse aggressive when I try to catch them from the field?



There are several reasons why this may occur and the most common ones relate to some unpleasant association being learned. It may be that the horse is resisting being taken away from a close social partner in the field, or that the horse is trying to avoid what happens after it is removed. To us, a stable may seem like a comfortable place for a horse, but for a horse it is a place of social isolation and may not appear so pleasant.

If the horse has some underlying injury (this may be quite subtle and difficult to detect), it may be predicting that coming in is associated with being ridden and responding to this association. It is therefore important to examine the situation carefully and seek assistance as necessary.

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This factsheet was created by the VetPartners Equine Team, with assistance from our Marketing Team and Veterinary Regulatory Advisors.

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