

Fact Sheet

Headshaking

Introduction

Horses will shake their heads for a range of reasons, but vets recognise that some of the time the headshaking signs are associated with diseases and nerve problems, causing discomfort and resulting in a characteristic pattern of headshaking signs.



Signs of headshaking

Headshaking horses show a pattern of signs that can include some or all of the following:

- Vertical (up and down), horizontal (side to side) or rotationary (round and round) flicking of the head
- Nose twitching and lip smacking
- Scrubbing the nose on the floor, against their legs, on the rider's feet or stable walls
- Excessive snorting could be a sign of headshaking
- Sometimes headshaking appears very dramatically and the horse behaves as if an insect has flown into the ear or up their nose

These headshaking signs are sometimes caused by infections, cysts, growths, or inflammation in the head that damage the trigeminal nerve that is responsible for communicating facial sensation to the brain. More often though, the signs are related to a problem with the function of the nerve itself and we call these cases trigeminal-mediated headshakers or idiopathic headshakers.

Horses usually develop the condition between the ages of 5 and 12 years. It can start rapidly and severely, or it can begin with very mild signs and gradually get worse over months and years. Some horses only show signs during the spring and summer, and others have signs that persist all year.



Examination of headshakers

Horses are examined at rest, on the lunge or ridden, and nerve blocks may be used to help determine the cause of the problem. Diagnostic imaging is often necessary and may include a combination of ultrasonography, radiography, scintigraphy and computed tomography (CT) examinations.

Examinations may additionally include:

- Orthopaedic assessment/lameness examination
- Neurological and ophthalmological examination
- Upper and lower airway investigations
- Oral endoscopy

Headshaking | Fact Sheet

Diagnosing headshaking

The use of computed tomography (CT) has revolutionised our ability to investigate headshaking cases. It enables us to rule out other diseases, leaving trigeminal-mediated headshaking as the most likely diagnosis. If you suspect your horse is showing headshaking signs, your vets are likely to recommend this important step in the investigation of headshaking.



Treatment for headshakers

- Systemic medications
- PENS therapy

There is an evidence-based, non-invasive treatment option for trigeminal-mediated headshaking cases called PENS therapy.

The procedure involves electrical stimulation of the trigeminal nerve at the infra-orbital foramen and is performed in the sedated horse, usually with three applications over a 15-day period.

PENS treatment has a good success rate in returning horses back to their previous athletic activities and (other than the sedation used during the procedure) has no withdrawal time prior to affiliated competition.



This factsheet was originally published on 15/02/21 and last reviewed on 28/02/25. It will be reviewed annually/ as necessary.

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

For further information, please contact your local VetPartners Equine Veterinary Practice on:

vetPartners

VetPartners Equine has a diverse range of practices and expertise within the group.

Together with our practices, our focus is on providing an excellent service to our equine clients.

No two practices are the same, and we understand and embrace that independent spirit.