

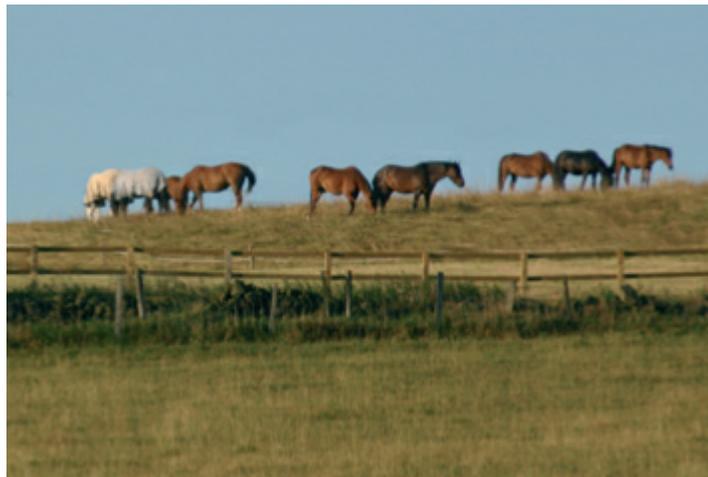
What are the essential horse behaviour facts?



Understanding the basic facts about horse behaviour is a very important part of responsible horse ownership. A good understanding of horse behaviour underpins all aspects of good horse management, training and riding. The key points that should always be remembered about horses are:-

1. Horses are highly social herd animals.

Horses are naturally highly social animals. A normal healthy horse would never live alone by choice. When horses live in a herd situation (either in the free living or domestic state) they have a rich and varied social life that includes activities such as play behaviour and mutual grooming behaviour. Horses that live in herds and graze naturally get to exercise their senses frequently. For example they smell each other when greeting and they smell each other's dung. They use their visual and hearing senses to look out for and listen for danger. They use their senses of taste and smell when selecting which plants to graze.



Living as part of a herd is just as important for domestic horses as it is for wild horses

Horses that live in a herd communicate with one another mainly by using body language. Horses have developed subtle and not so subtle signals in order to communicate with one another. Watch horses interacting when in a group and you will see that many small but effective gestures are used so that the herd members can communicate with one another.

Living as part of a herd has many advantages such as 'safety in numbers'. Grazing involves having the head down in the grass which makes it difficult to see predators approaching. More sets of eyes and ears mean that predators can be seen or heard sooner. A horse living alone in the wild would be much more likely to be caught by a predator. This horse would also expend too much nervous energy by having to stay in permanently alert state. So for this reason horses either live in family groups (a stallion, a few mares and their offspring) or bachelor groups (for colts and stallions that do not

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have mares). Horses that live in herds can take it in turns to be alert and to rest and therefore responsibility is shared among herd members.

A horse that is kept alone will be stressed due to not receiving the benefits of companionship.

2. Horses are herbivores and have evolved to eat a high fibre, low energy diet.

Horses are 'trickle feeders' which means that they eat small amounts almost continuously. The stomach is small and acid is continuously 'dripped' into the stomach. The food that a horse naturally eats (along with the saliva that is swallowed with it) buffers this acid. Horses eat for between 12 and 16 hours throughout the day and night. This food should be low in energy and high in fibre. A good example is low sugar grasses (such as most native grasses in Australia) and hay made from low sugar grasses. Horses are not meant eat 'meals' consisting of highly concentrated food only. Even if a horse is receiving concentrates (due to a high workload etc.) then the high fibre (but low energy) part of the diet must be kept up in order to keep the gut functioning properly. Otherwise the risk of colic and gastric ulcers is increased. The gastric ulcers come about because the acid in the stomach builds up to high levels.



Horses need access to fibre on an 'ad-lib' (as much as they want) basis. This fibre needs to be low energy so that they can eat for many hours a day and keep the gut healthy.

If we feed the horse *large* amounts of *high energy* feeds we also risk serious problems. Too much grain or free access to 'improved' grasses which are too high in sugar for horses (because they have been developed for the dairy cow and beef cattle industries) can cause problems such as obesity and laminitis which are very serious conditions.

3. Horses are a prey animal whose first line of defence is to run away from danger.

During all interactions with horses, it must be remembered that they are primarily 'fright and *flight*' animals. Everything about horses, the way they are built and the way they behave, is designed to meet this primary instinct. Other animals, including many herbivores, have evolved to defend themselves and their young if challenged. This is one of the reasons why cows have horns on their head for example. Horses are designed to run first, and defend themselves only if they cannot run away for some reason or cannot run fast enough. This is where the powerful backwards kick comes in - they can defend themselves while fleeing if necessary.

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A horse will instinctively run at the first sign of danger and for this reason horses are highly reactive. Good training can overcome this behaviour so that a horse and rider/handler are safer. However it must always be remembered that if a horse feels trapped then they may resort to kicking out, striking or biting if they cannot escape. When handling a horse aim to read the body language of the horse. Aim to not pressurize the horse to the point where he or she feels that escape or defence is necessary.

Horses that live in captivity can be more aggressive than feral/wild horses if their management leads to this. For example, in the wild, grass is generally available to all the horses or none of them at any particular time. Their food source is spread far and wide and so they do not have to fight to get it. In captivity horses are often fed supplementary feed which leads to competition. For example we tend to initiate aggression when we feed horses concentrates in a paddock together, in the wild no one comes along with a bucket to create this aggression.



Horses are highly reactive animals and can panic easily.

Therefore horses should ideally be separated into individual yards or stables for the short time that it takes to eat any supplementary feed both for their safety and the safety of handlers. Settled herds of domestic horses tend to be less aggressive if the group members are reasonably constant. A group which has constantly changing members (because horses are being removed or added to the herd) will tend to be less secure with the more aggressive horses seeking to establish or maintain themselves in the group.

4. Horses need lots of movement.

In the wild horses travel many kilometres a day from feed to water in what is known as the 'home range'. Horses walk steadily while grazing and also have to travel between where the water is and where feed is (the plants near water are always the first to be eaten out). Free living horses often travel around 30km a day - sometimes much more.

This steady movement helps to keep blood and lymphatic fluid moving around the body. It also helps to wear the hooves down as the horse moves across a variety of terrain ranging from soft and wet to abrasive and dry.

Movement is an integral part of the life of a natural living horse so it is very important that domestic horses are kept in a way that encourages movement as much as possible.

See our publication [A horse is a horse - of course \(2011\)](#) for more information about horse behaviour. All horse owners should understand horse behaviour and how this relates to the way that we keep them, train them and work them.

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