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CALMING



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# 4 ways to calm your horse *WITHOUT MEDICATION*

Here are options for easing equine anxiety when you can't or don't want to administer a tranquilizer or sedative.

A horse who frets and starts at every minor disturbance poses a danger to himself and anyone nearby. That means that sometimes it's simply necessary to administer a sedative or tranquilizer to help him through a veterinary or farriery procedure. But in the vast majority of instances, administering medications can also seem like bringing out the "heavy artillery" when, in fact, a lighter approach might be preferable. Indeed, there are a variety of ways to ease a horse's anxieties without using sedatives or tranquilizers. What works best depends on the particular horse and situation, but here are four alternatives to consider.

## 1. DESENSITIZATION TECHNIQUES

If your horse is generally well-mannered but gets upset about certain specific activities, such as loading into a trailer or receiving injections, you'll want to tackle desensitization training, which means gradually exposing him to the situation that he fears, gently pushing the limits of his comfort zone. Over time, with patient repetition, the horse will become less reactive to the situation that bothers him.

"If a horse is flighty and nervous for the farrier or for veterinary procedures, one of the best ways to approach this

problem is to work with the horse in advance, to prepare and desensitize him to what is going to happen," says Jenny Johnson, VMD, of Oakhill Shockwave and Veterinary Chiropractic in Calabasas, California. "If it's a young horse, the more you can expose him to a variety of circumstances, the better."

The techniques for desensitization training vary with the specific issues being addressed, but most rely on some form of advance and retreat: If a horse resents having his ears handled, for example, you might start by scratching him at the closest point he will permit contact before reacting, such as the shoulder. When he accepts that, you retreat—then next time move your hand further forward up his neck, and retreat again just before he reacts. These sessions may need to be repeated, but over time your horse ought to become more comfortable with the previously feared actions. "Once those horses become acclimated to a specific procedure or event, they realize it's not so bad and they don't panic," says Johnson.

## 2. CALMING SUPPLEMENTS

Browse the supplements section of any well-stocked retailer, and you'll find dozens of products intended to help calm fractious horses. None are

classified as drugs, which means their manufacturers have to prove only that they are safe for your horse, not that they are effective. Nevertheless, many have been on the market for years, and customers have reported good results.

Ingredients in calming supplements vary. Many contain magnesium, which plays a role in muscle and nerve function; chromium, a mineral that helps regulate blood sugar; and thiamine (vitamin B1), which supports the nervous system.

You'll also find supplements that contain herbal ingredients, such as chamomile, valerian root and raspberry leaf, all of which are traditional calming agents. "These might help some horses and not others," says Johnson. "There are many herbal products available and some are probably helpful, but it depends on the horse and the situation, and what you are trying to accomplish."

One of the newer products on the market contains alpha-casozepine, a protein derived from milk that is believed to calm nursing youngsters. Studies have shown that alpha-casozepine has calming effects in several species. In a 2012 study from the University of Pennsylvania, three semi-feral ponies were given an oral alpha-casozepine supplement once



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daily beginning five days prior to being brought into a barn for two weeks of basic training for tasks such as haltering, stabling, leading, tethering and grooming. The three ponies treated with alpha-casozepine, along with three nontreated control ponies, were then ranked on a scale from 1 to 6 for calmness, compliance and their ability to learn new skills. All three of the treated ponies performed better than the untreated controls, and six weeks after the initial training period, the treated ponies had also retained the most training.

Talk to your veterinarian or an equine nutritionist before adding new products to your horse's feed regimen. They may be able to suggest specific brands or formulations that might be more appropriate for your horse. If you take your horse to shows, you also need to be careful of ingredients that might appear on drug screenings.

"If the horse owner is competing in shows I would caution against giving the horse something that does not have a full list of ingredients. Some herbs may be on the forbidden substance list, not so much because they are a problem but because they are masking agents," Johnson says. "Just because a substance is natural or organic does not mean that it will not test or even that it is good for your horse. Both the United States Equestrian Federation and the Fédération Equestre Internationale have lists of forbidden substances on their websites, along with medication guidelines, that every owner should consult prior to administering any type of supplement to their horse."

### 3. AROMATHERAPY

Since ancient times, people have used essential oils extracted from flowers, roots, bark other plant parts for

aromatherapy to enhance physical and mental well-being. Nowadays, aromatherapy is also available for horses. Treatments may be performed by aroma-therapists, but several direct-to-consumer products are also on the market.

Aromatherapy with essential oils is not approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for any specific treatments, but studies in human medicine have suggested that lavender oil can reduce pain and ease anxieties in

patients with cancer and other serious medical issues.

One 2013 study, conducted at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, measured the effects of lavender essential oil on seven horses. Each horse's heart rate was documented before and after an air horn was set off in an adjoining stall. All of the horses underwent the test twice: once while breathing pure humidified air, and once while exposed to an 80/20 percent mix of humidified air with aerosolized lavender essential oil. When exposed to the lavender, the horses' heart rates were significantly lower, an indication that they were less stressed by the noise.

### 4. PHEROMONES

Chemicals released by animals to affect the behavior of others in the environment, pheromones play many roles, signaling everything from alarm to sexual receptivity. For several years, products based on pheromones secreted by females to comfort and reassure their offspring have been available to help calm anxious dogs and cats. In recent years, similar products for horses have been introduced. One product contains a synthetic version of "equine appeasing hormone," which nursing mares produce to calm their foals. The product is a gel that is applied inside the horse's nostrils at least 30 minutes prior to a stressful event or situation.

**H**igh-strung behavior may be encoded in your horse's genes, but it doesn't have to rule his life or define your relationship with him. By taking steps to calm him, and teach him that he need not be fearful, you can go a long way toward keeping him safe and happy, and maybe even a joy to work with. ●



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