

Headshaking Syndrome

It is my belief that the syndrome known as headshaking results from one single but significant factor – **'Stress'**

The horse by its very nature is a prey animal, designed to live in a herd, grazing & constantly on the watch for predators. We have forced it to change its entire way of life. We separate a foal from its dam after just a few short months. We shut it up in a stable for long hours. When turned out it sometimes has to live alone without the companionship of others of its species.

We feed synthetically & unnaturally. We inject it with vaccines & put chemicals into its system. We change its home, owner & friends at the drop of a hat. We put a saddle & bridle on it with a big unbalanced weight on top and expect it to conform in a few short weeks. We put it into a confined space and trail it along busy roads & then expect it to perform to the best of its ability without argument.

When things start to go wrong we then call out a perfect stranger who prods pokes, sticks needles in at best. At worst we take the animal to a completely strange environment, put more chemicals into its body and perform all sorts of tests. These are just a few examples of the stress that we put upon these highly sensitive creatures

If we treated a human being in this way that person would probably end up having a nervous breakdown.

Luckily we are able to let others know when we are stressed. Horses are much less able, particularly the nice, willing, trainable types who never argue but just get on with what is asked of them, until there comes a point when they have no choice. ***The consequences of that stress takes over.***

Since conversing with many headshakers owners I have noted without exception that every headshaker has a history of either acute or prolonged stress in varying forms. They all fit a pattern that nobody has appeared to notice.

There is also evidence that approximately 90% of headshakers are geldings. The majority of the rest being nice trainable mares with virtually no stallions suffering, because of course you tell a gelding, ask a mare & discuss it with a stallion!

All forms of stress produce the same physiological consequences. This includes **environmental stress** (heat, cold and noise, etc.), **chemical stress** (pollution, drugs, vaccines, wormers etc.), **physical stress** (overexertion, trauma, infection, etc.), **psychological stress** (worry, fear, change of owner/yard/friends etc.) and **biochemical stress** (nutritional deficiencies etc.). All of these different sources of stress are additive and cumulative in their effects.

This results in what is called Adrenal Maladaption Syndrome or Hyperadaptosis

The Canadian physician, Dr. Hans Selye, extensively studied the adrenals and the effect of stress on them. What he called the "General Adaptation Syndrome" has at least three stages as follows.

(1) The adrenal glands enlarge and secrete large quantities of adrenal cortical hormones. These hormones (85% of which is cortisol) suppress inflammatory responses and mobilize the body's energy reserves. This puts the body on RED ALERT and diverts all of the body's biochemical resources to immediate survival. The body's self healing mechanisms are arrested

(healing diverts energy and raw materials away from immediate survival), the immune system is suppressed, glycogen stores in the liver and muscle tissue are mobilized to raise the blood sugar level and digestion and assimilation are inhibited. The stomach lining becomes thin and ulcerated and the thymus gland and lymphatic tissue shrinks. In this stage the eyes usually become glassy.

(2) The second stage ("resistance stage") allows the corticosteroids to continue fighting a stressor long after the short-lived "fight or flight" response has worn off. With chronic stress the adrenals become overtaxed and depleted, however if at this stage health is reasonably good the adrenals will rebuild themselves and actually grow larger. They will however continue pumping out excessive amounts of cortisol causing various symptoms. This stage can go on for a number of years before stage 3 is reached.

(3) Adrenal exhaustion is reached when there is no reserve capacity to handle stress without "going to pieces." This may mean total collapse of body function or of specific organs or glands, especially the heart and adrenals, and impairment of blood vessels and the immune system, whatever is inherently weak. Loss of potassium becomes extreme and depletion of glucocorticoids becomes severe, often "instantly" leading to low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia) symptoms, and a tendency for greater and longer lasting illness, and even to "nervous breakdown."

The following are some of the symptoms that I believe could present themselves due to maladaptation in horses

- Nervousness
- Extreme & irrational anxiety
- Excessive fatigue
- Salt craving
- Allergies
- Skin problems
- Sarcoids
- Muscular pain & tenderness that cannot be resolved with treatment/Fybromyalgia
- Joint pains & tenderness
- Raised resting heart rate/pulse
- Abdominal discomfort
- Diarrhoea
- Increased water intake/urination
- Obesity/fatty lumps/cresty neck
- Glassy/hard looking eyes
- Unusually quick wound healing but with extra scar tissue
- Loss of bone density
- Sudden bursts of energy followed by extreme fatigue
- Sensitivity around ears & nose
- **Extreme migrainous headaches/trigeminal pain i.e headshaking**

I believe that not all horses suffering from maladaptation have symptoms of headshaking.

These horses go on to become 'Cushings' syndrome horses.

These horses can also benefit greatly from the use of Adaptogens.

THE SEASONAL HEADSHAKER

All mammals produce a hormone called Melatonin – commonly known as the hormone of darkness. In Autumn & Winter as the days become shorter, melatonin production increases. In Spring & summer as the days become longer melatonin production decreases.

Melatonin produces a substance called arginine vasotocin, which inhibits cortisol production

It would therefore seem reasonable to assume that the seasonal pattern of this syndrome is due to extra amounts of Melatonin being made in the Winter months which brings cortisol levels down, thereby lessening the destructive effects of the cortisol & stopping some of its symptoms showing i.e. headshaking.

The treatment to combat this syndrome is a combination of herbal adaptogens

What is an Adaptogen? A Simple Definition

As can be surmised from the word itself, an 'adaptogen' is a substance that helps the body to "adapt" to particular stresses put upon it.

The word 'adaptogen' was first coined by the Russian scientist Dr. N.V. Lazarev in 1947. He reported on several indigenous plants that helped increase the body's natural resistance to environmental stresses and later coined the term "adaptogens".

However, these rare natural plants, now called adaptogens, have been used for centuries by Chinese herbalists and in Viking and Russian folk medicine.

One in 4,000 Plants

To be considered a true adaptogen, a plant must conform to the following criteria:

The plant must be non-toxic and totally harmless to the body. It must allow the continuing normal physiological of the individual.

- The action it exerts must be non-specific and should maintain normal body functions despite a wide range of onslaughts to the body (i.e. stress).

- It should normalize body functions irrespective of existing pathological conditions.

Unlike allopathic drugs which carry with them the possibility of side effects, adaptogens must benefit the body without disturbing it or doing it harm. Not many plants possess adaptogenic properties. In fact it is estimated that only one in 4,000 plants is classified as an adaptogen.

There are several adaptogenic remedies readily available that will work for horses. I am finding that no one horse or condition is the same, therefore the choice of adaptogens used will vary from horse to horse, depending upon its symptoms & cause. I also believe that as well as the use of adaptogens, **all stress should be removed from the suffering horses**

environment & he should be allowed to live as natural a life as possible until such a time as his adrenal glands have returned to their normal function.

However exercise is important for adrenal health and should be started again as soon as the horse appears to be calm. A slow steady fitness regime should be introduced. **On no account should the horse continue to be worked if it appears distressed or is showing symptoms of headshaking.**

How long will it take?

This of course will vary from horse to horse depending on the amount & type of stress that has caused the problem in the first place. Providing the horse is in a well managed stress free environment, subtle changes will be noticed in the 1st 3 weeks.

- He may become less anxious
- His stable may be cleaner
- He may drink less water
- His skin and face may become less sensitive
- His eyes may become soft & relaxed

It is a good idea to diary these things to check his progress.

Weeks 3-6 more of these changes should become evident.

If your horse shows signs of extreme tiredness this is a good sign that the herbs are working, however he may need some extra herbs to assist with this fatigue until his body has had time to heal. Please contact me and I will be happy to help.

I am finding that actual headshaking is reducing between 6 – 8 weeks. If your horse still has a slight ticking, once again a slightly different herb will be required to help this. Please contact me.

If after the first 3 weeks there is no alteration in your horses behaviour, it is due to the wrong combination of adaptogens being used.

Like people, horses have different body types, temperaments etc. In TCM it is referred to as 'The five element theory' & different herbs work in different ways according to this theory. Please contact me as I can advise & provide a different combination for your horse.

Remember 'every disease has a cause & a cure'

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