

Ask A Vet

Is cribbing detrimental to future athletic performance and what is the best way to control it?

Cribbing has not been proven to be directly detrimental to the future athletic performance of the horse. However, cribbing can cause several problems that would prohibit a horse from reaching its full potential. Management practices can help break the habit if identified early and there are several advanced therapies available that have had some success.

Cribbing is when a horse places its upper front teeth (incisors) on a flat horizontal surface, pulls backward and contracts the neck muscles. This is when the familiar grunting noise is heard. Previously believed to be associated with gulping air or wind sucking, the grunting may actually be caused by an expulsion of air. Studies have shown that little to no air travels down the esophagus. Cribbing is a stereotypic behavior (stable vice) or repetitive behavior without any apparent reason or purpose.

Cribbing needs to be identified and addressed as early as possible to help break the habit. If unchecked, it can lead to several problems that may keep a horse from reaching its full potential. Cribbing causes premature wearing down of the upper incisors, and can lead to weight loss if grazing becomes difficult. Weight loss also can occur due to wasted energy cribbing and to time wasted cribbing rather than grazing. Cribbers also have a higher incidence of colic. This most likely is due to the original cause of the cribbing; decreased forage, decreased turnout/activity, decreased social interaction, and concentrate diets.

Identification and management of cribbers early on is the key to helping break this bad habit. Management practices should include minimizing starch-based and sweet-feed concentrates, providing ad-lib forage and adequate time on pasture, and the avoidance of unnecessary stressful practices. A cribbing collar applied to the throatlatch area may cause enough discomfort to deter cribbing behavior. These collars have limited success. Stall-side distractions such as mirrors, balls, tires, etc. can be placed to distract or entertain the horse. Several sessions of acupuncture have been used successfully to treat cribbing. There is a common surgical procedure available to disable the horse from cribbing. It involves general anesthesia and severing three muscles in the neck and denervating a fourth muscle. The procedure is not guaranteed. Chronic cribbers may incorporate other muscles into the act of cribbing and success may be short-lived. The surgery also is not without the risk of anesthetic complications and the chance for infection.

Although cribbing has not been proven to be directly detrimental to future performance, it may keep a young horse from reaching its full potential as time and energy are wasted on cribbing. Several options are available for intervention but the main thing to remember is to catch it and intervene early. Please consult your equine veterinarian for more information about the procedures mentioned above.



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Dr. Martinez graduated from the Oklahoma State College of Veterinary Medicine in 2003. He completed an ambulatory internship at Hagyard Equine Medical Institute and became a Field Care Associate in 2004 and a member of the practice in 2014. His practice includes emergency field medicine, herd health and wellness, neonatal foal care, mare and stallion reproduction, and equine dentistry. Dr. Martinez is actively involved with veterinary medicine organizations, holding positions in the Kentucky Association of Equine Practitioners and the National American Association of Equine Practitioners. His personal interests include veterinary leadership development and practice management. His wife practices small animal emergency medicine in Lexington, KY. They live in Versailles with their son, daughter and two dogs.

