

STALL CONFINEMENT

By Eleanor Blazer ©

Your heart is racing; your palms are sweating; your knees are weak...are you having a heart attack? No – you're watching your favorite mare race around the pasture like a lunatic. Her "airs above the ground" are outstanding; her rollbacks before she hits the fence are perfect; her lead changes are precise. But you're thinking of putting her in her stall before she injures herself. Stall confinement makes us feel good, but how about the horse?

**‘CONFINE’ means: "to restrict; to incarcerate; to limit; to keep within a boundary".
It doesn't sound very pleasant.**

Stall confinement can protect your horse from injury and foul weather. But it leads to other problems.

- **Chewing** – chewing is not the same thing as cribbing. When a horse chews, he splinters the wood, which is then dropped or swallowed. The splinters can cause laceration of the gums, tongue and mucous membrane. The wood splinters can also cause problems in the digestive tract. The damage done to wooden walls can be extensive and expensive.

Horses in confinement usually chew because they are bored or lack long-stem fiber (forage).

- **Colic** – colic is the word we use to describe any equine stomach pain, regardless of cause. The horse is a continuous grazer. In his natural environment the horse is constantly on the move, – searching for forage and water. The movement aids digestive mobility.

Confinement restricts this natural aid to digestion.

- **Cribbing** – If a horse clenches the edge of an object with his front teeth - such as a board or his feed tub-- arches his neck and then appears to suck air - he is cribbing. You can usually hear a grunting noise which can sound like a burp or belch.

Confinement is only one of the many causes of cribbing. One or more of the following may also cause cribbing - environment, lack of forage, over-feeding of concentrates, ulcers and boredom.

In addition to damaging property, cribbing wears down the teeth. Colic tends to present itself more often

in cribs. Many dedicated cribs prefer to crib than eat, resulting in weight loss.

- **Developmental Orthopedic Disease (DOD)** – This disease is seen in young, fast growing horses. It is the inflammation of the growth plate in the long bones; resulting in pain, heat and swelling of the joints (primarily the knees, hocks and fetlocks).

Exercise is an important part of joint development and health. Growing foals need exercise. The freedom to run and play enhances bone growth and development. Forced exercise is not good for foals and should be avoided.

Do not keep foals confined in a stall or small area.

- **Enteroliths** – Enteroliths or bezoars are stones that form in the intestinal tract of horses. They are made of minerals - primarily magnesium, ammonium and phosphate. The cause of the stone formation is under constant research. At this time it is believed that enterolithiasis is caused by several factors: genetic, environment and diet.

Stall confinement and lack of access to pasture increases the risk of enterolith development. Exercise improves the mobility of the intestinal tract and grass is thought to dilute the mineral concentration.

- **Hoof Problems** – unbalanced hooves; dry, brittle hooves; soft, rotten hooves are a few hoof related problems caused by stall confinement.

Continue...Confinement

We want to provide our horses with absorbent bedding and a clean, soft area to rest. But this environment can cause heel and quarter cracks, and contracted heels – leading to unbalanced hooves.

Lack of blood flow to the hooves due to restricted exercise is detrimental to a healthy hoof. Navicular disease is very common in horses confined.

An uneven surface in the stall can lead to strain on the joints, ligaments and tendons.

If the stall is allowed to become wet – and remains wet, the hoof can become rotted and thrush may develop.

Confinement is not conducive to healthy balanced hooves.

- **Injury** – the main reason we confine horses to a stall is to avoid injury. But stall confinement can cause injury.

Horses can become cast. A cast horse is one that has tried to roll over, but is too close to the wall. The legs are up against the wall and the horse cannot stand. While, this can happen in a pasture, it is more common in stalls.

A cast horse can injure himself while struggling to get up. If he is not found and rescued, a twisted intestine or suffocation may occur.

To avoid the chances of a horse becoming cast, stalls should be large and bedding piled around the sides to prevent the horse from getting too close to the wall. There are commercial products on the market that claim to help prevent a horse from becoming cast.

Neglecting the care of the stall may also cause injury. Periodically the stall should be inspected for nails, loose or rotten boards and solid flooring. Water cups, feeders and other pieces of equipment need to be inspected.

Healthy horses, lacking sufficient exercise, can injure themselves while trying to release excessive energy. Kicking, rearing, pacing, pawing and other extreme movement can lead to injury.

- **Restricted Blood Circulation** – horses need exercise to stay healthy. Exercise promotes increase blood circulation, needed by the equine body to remain healthy.

- **Respiratory Conditions** – dust, mold and lack of fresh air will lead to respiratory problems.

The most renowned horse related respiratory problem is called "heaves", also known as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Horses prone to heaves cannot tolerate dust, mold, pollen and other allergens present in the environment. Stall confinement concentrates these potential COPD triggers resulting in an attack to the respiratory system. COPD rarely develops in horses not confined.

Air tight stalls should be avoided. Good air circulation, free of drafts is a must for stabled horses.

- **Ulcers** – an ulcer is a painful lesion in the lining of the digestive system.

There are many causes of ulcers. Lack of forage, too much concentrate in the diet, lack of exercise, stress, medications or drugs that damage the protective coating of the stomach and poor management of the horse are a few. Horses confined to stalls tend to be exposed to one or more of these ulcer causing circumstances.

- **Weaving or Stall Walking** – Weaving or stall walking provides many things - exercise, relief from boredom, unbalanced hooves, uneven stall floor, decrease in calories leading to weight loss and energy loss. It is a sign the horse is not happy.

If you make a list with the pros and cons of keeping a horse confined the negative side will be longer. Horses need exercise, companionship, fresh air and mental stimulation.

But we confine them anyway!

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