

20 WAYS TO DITCH YOUR NERVES

Horse

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Calling for action on tight nosebands

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Release the pressure



THE EXPERT
Sue Palmer

A chartered veterinary physiotherapist, BHSAI and recommended associate of Intelligent Horsemanship, Sue helps owners create better partnerships with horses.



THE EXPERT
Hannah Mace

Hannah is an equine massage specialist and has studied natural horsemanship techniques, behavioural science and equine psychology.

Are tight nosebands which exert excessive pressure and potentially cause physical harm becoming a welfare issue, ask Sue Palmer and Hannah Mace

While the FEI dressage rulebook states 'a cavesson noseband may never be as tightly fixed so as to harm the horse', there is no scientifically-proven method of detecting this.

ISES's position on nosebands has received support from equine and welfare groups around the

world, including the RSPCA, the Brooke and Blue Cross.

Tony Tyler, deputy chief executive of World Horse Welfare, said: "Restrictive nosebands should not be used in such a way that causes the horse pain or discomfort."

Essential freedom

For an animal that chews approximately 30,000 times a day, freedom of jaw movement is vital.

Restriction of the jaw, or muscular tension and pain in this area, can lead to a multitude of ridden and behavioural issues.

A clenched jaw creates muscle tension and leads to

increased reflexes throughout the body, potentially making a horse spooky.

A tight noseband can restrict movement in a way similar to clenching the jaw, and therefore can affect performance. For a competition animal that needs to move as freely as possible, whether jumping or doing dressage, it seems illogical to restrict him with a piece of tack.

There is a danger, too, that breathing can be hampered by a noseband that is tight and incorrectly fitted. A horse can only breathe through his nostrils, not his mouth. Sufficient oxygenation of the muscles is essential for optimal performance, so it is important the air supply is not restricted during exercise.

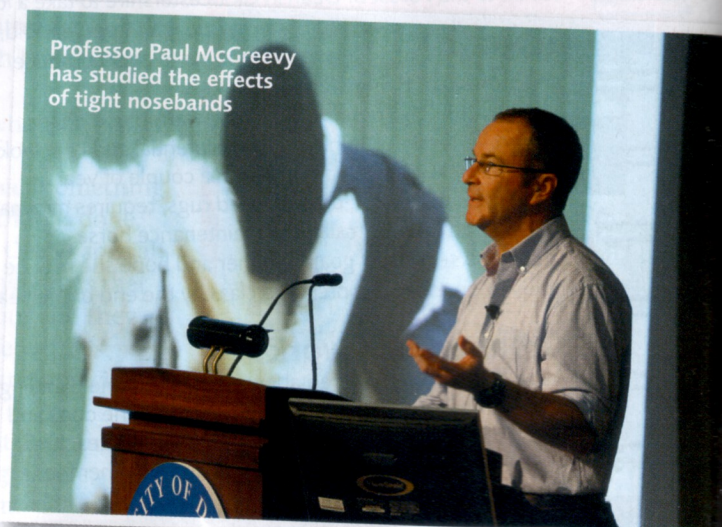
Nosebands and how tight they should – or shouldn't – be is one of the hottest topics in the horseworld.


There is concern tight nosebands are causing horses discomfort, stress and even physical damage, and riders are reaching for drops, flashes and Grakles too quickly when a schooling issue surfaces. Even a cavesson noseband can cause problems in the wrong hands.

The subject of noseband tightness came up for discussion at the annual conference of the International Society for Equitation Science (ISES), which promotes research that will raise welfare and safety standards.

The society is recommending a 'taper gauge' is used by stewards as part of equipment checks at competitions.

Based on the 'two-finger' rule of checking the fit of a noseband, the gauge would highlight if excessive pressure was being exerted.





Tight nosebands could affect breathing and therefore performance

One research study, carried out by Professor Paul McGreevy of the University of Sydney, Australia, used infrared thermography to measure the temperature of horses' eyes and facial skin, and through this detect the level of stress they experienced.

Professor McGreevy and his team found that tightening nosebands led to increased eye temperature and decreased skin temperature, indicating horses were experiencing a stress response, and also that the circulation to the facial skin had been affected.

"Sadly, the practice of restricting jaw movement has become entrenched, as it prevents the horse from opening his mouth, which in dressage is regarded as a sign of resistance or lack of compliance and attracts penalties for the rider," said Professor McGreevy.

"So, here is the paradox – rules that penalise evidence of rough riding (such as mouth opening) have prompted the development of gadgets that mask such evidence."

Getting the message across

Horses are non-verbal animals and can only communicate with a rider or handler through their behaviour.

Some behaviours, particularly in the ridden horse, include opening the mouth,

sticking out the tongue or crossing the jaw.

Behaviour has a root cause, and strapping the jaw tightly shut does not address the underlying problem.

"The practice of restricting equine jaw movement has become entrenched"

There is then a risk the horse will choose a different behaviour in his attempt to communicate with his rider, such as napping or rearing.

Freedom to move the jaw means the rider can detect the subtle signs from their horse and address the issues before

they escalate into behavioural problems.

Sympathetic training

Horses are generally trained using pressure and release techniques. This can be effective and humane when pressure is applied subtly and removed as soon as the horse responds.

Case Study

"I took off my flash strap"

"I removed the flash strap from the noseband of my part-share horse," says Allison Reynolds. "She was obedient but heavy in the hand, with a number of issues I considered to be linked to confusion in the mouth."

"After taking the flash off, I went back to basics, retraining her to stop and turn. I made sure I asked lightly, quickly escalating to a heavier pressure if she didn't respond."

"She soon learned to stop from a light pressure and now I achieve this mainly off my seat, occasionally having to reinforce the message with a rein aid."

"Interestingly, the cavesson part of her noseband I left on but fasten it loosely."

"When I observe people tack up I most commonly see people doing a cavesson and flash up as tight as they possibly can."

"I wonder how many people check for clarity of training before opting for a noseband fix?"

HORSE WELFARE

Consistent, sensitive riding will reap huge rewards



But an over-tight noseband will not allow the horse to escape the pressure in such a clear manner when the rider gives with their hands.

If your horse is moving his jaw excessively in his ridden work, he is doing this for a reason.

The key is to find the root cause before reaching for a new piece of tack, which could mask the problem and not allow any true improvement.

Grand Prix dressage rider Leonie Smith has trained several horses to

Advanced level and competed in over 40 National and Regional championships.

She teaches all levels of rider from her base in Shropshire and states: "In my experience, tight nosebands are used to hide a pain reaction or bad training and are not at all a necessary schooling aid.

"As long as there is not a physical issue, training your horse to be more responsive to your aids can eliminate the need for a tight noseband.

"Horses need to be trained to become aware of more sensitive aids – they are not pre-programmed to instantly do what a rider wants.

"To become strong and resist the bit, the horse has to have something to pull against. Strong hands make a strong horse, and most horses become strong because the rider doesn't release pressure as a reward once the horse has reacted correctly."

Leonie says when teaching your horse something new, you should always start with a light aid, giving your horse a chance to comply, then correcting with a firmer aid if needed.

"Stay consistent and make sure you release the contact as a reward once the

aid has been obeyed," she continues. "Using weight and seat aids in conjunction with a rein aid is also a great way to help your horse have a more sensitive, soft, closed mouth."

Transitions are key

Leonie recommends using simple transitions, starting with walk to halt, to train your horse to become more sensitive to your aids.

Then, experiment by trying to get your horse to halt without using any rein aids.

Once walk-to-halt transitions have been perfected, progress to trot-walk and canter-trot.

"Take things slowly and don't expect too much from your horse at first," suggests Leonie. "Doing a canter-to-walk transition on a horse that is not engaged and sitting on his hind legs will almost always result in him opening his mouth, leaning on you and crossing his jaw.

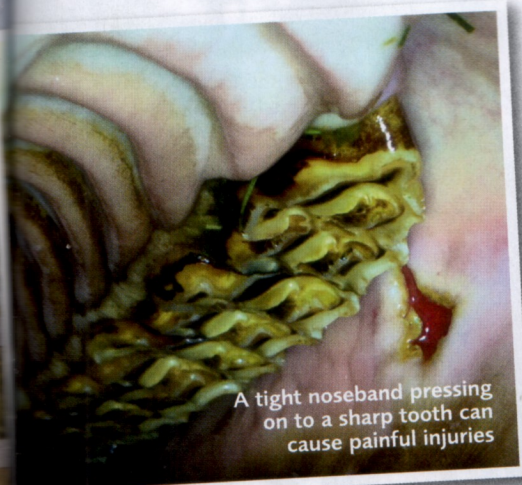
"Allow transitions on a green horse to be progressive, until he is strong enough to keep his weight back on his quarters.

"Visualising the bit being still in the mouth and the horse's jaw soft and relaxed can help."

"Horses are not pre-programmed to instantly do what a rider wants them to"

The taper gauge measures noseband pressure





A tight noseband pressing on to a sharp tooth can cause painful injuries

Case Study

"I'd rather go without a noseband!"

"My five-year-old goes without a noseband unless he is showing – and then I will fasten it as loose as possible," says Teagan Epps from Brinkworth in Wiltshire.

"Even in a bridle with a cavesson noseband, I can feel my gelding back off the hand and he is super light already.

"I also have a Thoroughbred, which goes without a noseband, as he is an ex-racehorse and is being reschooled.

"He opens and crosses his jaw but I don't think there's any point in putting

a noseband on him to cover this up. It only happens when he doesn't understand something he's being asked and then he gets stressed and reverts to racing mode.

"But with patient schooling, he is learning that trying to evade doesn't get him anywhere.

"I keep everything light until he relaxes, and the resistance is happening less often.

"Also, I find that doing stretches and warming him up in-hand, before doing any ridden work, is beneficial."

A positive change

If you suffer from nerves, you might panic at the thought of what the horse might do if you alter his noseband.

The best thing to do is loosen it one hole at a time. Perhaps do this for the first time when you are in the arena, with your instructor on hand.

Of course, a different bit could be the solution – your horse may be uncomfortable or unhappy in his current one. Some horses prefer loose-ring bits, while others are happier with a thinner mouthpiece.

Consult an instructor or other experienced person, and don't forget there are bit banks in operation which let you try before you buy.

"Keep working on the basics and in the long run you will progress more quickly, riding a sensitive horse who has a relaxed jaw with no need for a tight noseband," says Leonie.


Listen to your horse

In conclusion, with any 'problem behaviour' it is necessary to find out what the horse is trying to tell us in order to resolve an issue.

So, if your horse is displaying excessive jaw movement, opening his mouth wide or sticking out his tongue, consider whether his noseband is affecting his basic need to breathe efficiently.

Might he be trying to tell you that he's hurting somewhere, and a call to your vet, physiotherapist, equine dental technician or saddler is in order?

And could sharp teeth mean the noseband is causing discomfort that the horse cannot find a way to avoid?

It is important to listen to your horse and not use a noseband to mask a training issue rather than addressing it. 



Contacts

- Sue Palmer: www.holisticheorsehelp.com;
- Hannah Mace: www.perfectponieskent.co.uk;
- Leonie Smith: www.daneswooddressage.co.uk;
- ISES: www.equitationscience.com.

Practise riding transitions using subtle aids