

Introduction to the Veterinary Profession

VETS30030 / VETS90122



Module: Care and welfare of domestic animals

Large Animal Behaviour

Horses

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History of horses



- Prehistoric ancestor was *Eohippus angustidens*, who lived in heavy forest in North America
- Most obvious change was from browser to grazer
- *Equus* evolved around 4 million years ago and was the forefather of horses, asses and zebras
- *Equus caballus* is the modern horse, which was widespread from central Asia to most of Europe
- Przewalski's horse, Tarpan and a European forest horse were direct ancestors of the modern horse

Domestication

- Domestication started about 6,000 years ago at multiple locations at multiple times
- This resulted in a large genetic variation and the grounds of many different breeds
- Horses were probably not used for transport and ridden until much later



Social structure

- We know a lot about natural behaviour of the horse from those living in the wild (brumbies, mustangs)
- They live in large herds with sub-groups (bands), consisting of mares and offspring, with one or two stallions
- Other males live in bachelor bands
- Complex social hierarchy
- Grazing (walking slowly) most of the day
- Can sleep standing up



Communication

- Body language, ear and tail position, facial expression, vocalisation
 - Mutual grooming for social cohesion
 - Threats can be head toss or head extension, ears back, stare, lifting a leg, biting
 - Submission can be shown by lowering head, looking away
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- Near 360 degree vision
 - Built for flight, rather than fight



Management of horses



- Horses are herd animals, so should be kept with at least one companion
- Horses naturally walk and graze all day, so they should be provided with enough exercise and frequent meals
- Stomach ulcers and stereotypic behaviour (e.g. weaving, cribbing, fence walking) are frequently seen in horses where management is lacking

Handling horses

- Handle in a location where the horse feels safe
- Very strong flight instinct
- Pay attention to their body language and ears
- Stay calm and keep the horse calm
- Don't get in a fight!



Training of horses



- Understanding training principles will help you handle them
- Horses learn through release from pressure
- If you apply pressure, only release at a desirable moment. Anytime pressure is released will train the horse, good or bad!
- This principle applies for any training we do with horses and anytime we interact with them

Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQtqeghoitI>

Hierarchy not necessarily linear, depends on motivation

Hard to catch horse

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gug5HX4M9UQ>

Eye medication using positive reinforcement

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EO2FUIUtm_8&feature=emb_logo

Vet handling

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9BF2KJU_ZQ&feature=emb_logo

Take home messages

- Understand the natural behaviour of a species, they will help you predict how they will behave
- When managing and handling an animal, work with their natural instinct
- Social animals are very good at reading body language, become good at reading theirs!