

HEADSHAKING

Most horses shake their heads from time to time, but when does this go beyond a normal response to one with a physical cause? What might the cause(s) be?

Clinical signs

- Uncontrollable shaking of the head, not just done in response to an external stimulus, in annoyance or to avoid the bit!
- May be up and down (“typical headshaking”), side to side or even rotary
- Other signs may include an “anxious” expression, snorting, rubbing at the face or even striking at face and **signs of distress**
- Varies from slight (grade 1) to extreme (5). Higher grade horses are unrideable, show bizarre behaviour and may be very dangerous even to be near
- Various factors such as pollen, bright sunlight, and insects may trigger headshaking, and this may help to explain why it may vary with different seasons
- It is most common in mature geldings

Diagnosis

Firstly, a behavioural cause of headshaking needs to be ruled out. These include improper biting, poor rider technique, fear/anxiety, and riding in an excessively tight outline in dressage horses.

Clinical signs and history are very important. A diary of when the headshaking was seen- that is the time of day, conditions such as weather/insects, what the horse was being asked to do and how bad it was can all be very useful. If a particular trigger reliably causes headshaking, techniques to avoid or reduce the inciting effect can be used as part of the diagnosis.

Unfortunately, headshaking as a disease is not caused by one process but potentially by many. Some of these may be relatively easy to find but others are not. Diagnosis is attempted by a process of elimination that looks for potential problems, for example dental or sinus pain. This elimination process includes evaluation of a horse’s eyes, ears, teeth/sinuses, skull, neck and guttural pouches to try and find abnormalities. In some instances, headshaking could be due to lameness, therefore gait evaluation may be performed. Investigations to rule out possible causes can be expensive, particularly if advanced imaging, such as CT, is used. If no obvious problem can be found, then the horse is likely to be suffering from ‘idiopathic headshaking’ (idiopathic = unknown cause). This is a facial pain in response to inappropriate triggers and it is probably similar to trigeminal neuralgia in people. Nerve blocks to help confirm idiopathic headshaking are possible but are not conclusive in all cases.

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Treatment

- Varies with the cause; if a cause is found then treatment of this may resolve the headshaking
- Nose nets help some headshakers, especially for a pollen or insect-related trigger and are now permitted at some competitions. These can be quite effective.
- Tinted contact lenses may help headshakers stimulated by sunlight.
- Steroid inhalers may possibly help some with an allergic trigger although this is controversial.
- Magnesium-based calmers seem to help some horses, although the science behind this is poor; clinically they appear to have some effect.
- Some drugs have been shown to help idiopathic headshakers, but most are expensive and short term.
- Percutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (PENS) has been shown to be beneficial in some horses.
- Surgery is possible for idiopathic headshakers which have been thoroughly worked up, but it is expensive and often does not work in the long term.

Key points

- ✓ Not every horse that shakes their head, even regularly, is a headshaker!
- ✓ However, horses with true headshaking are in **distress** and not being badly behaved, they need investigation and treatment!
- ✓ Diagnosis can be challenging, and treatment can be similarly frustrating.
- ✓ Keeping a diary of what your horses does when and under what conditions can be helpful in getting a diagnosis.
- ✓ Videos of headshaking can also be useful to show to your vet.