

# Aggression

Horses are not usually aggressive; on the whole herds stay together because they form a hierarchy within the group, allowing them to get on well with each other. When a horse shows aggression, it is generally as a result of a perceived threat from either the environment in which it finds itself or in response to a noxious stimulus from within the animal itself, for example an animal in pain.



## Causes of aggression

- **Survival** - Fighting may occur if resources such as food, water, shelter are limited especially in domestic situations.
- **Hormonal influences** – Testosterone can be involved in aggressive behaviour.
- **Frustration** - When an animal is single-mindedly set on doing something and cannot due to circumstances it becomes agitated and frustrated, leading to aggression.
- **Fear** – Along with aggression, fear stems from a physiological response. The hormone adrenaline increases heart rate, blood glucose levels and blood flow to muscles. Often there is a switch from fear to aggression when an animal cannot follow its fear programme and escape so it turns to attack instead as a form of defence.
- **Pain** – Aggression may be used by an animal in order to protect an injury.
- **New born foal** – The maternal protection instinct may stimulate aggression towards other horses or humans.

## KEY POINTS

- Aggression either extends from a threat in the animal's environment or from within the horse itself.
- Signs of aggression in horses include threatening to bite, strike, kick or chase.
- Horses can become aggressive for a number of reasons, including survival, hormonal influences, frustration, fear and pain.
- Successful treatment of aggression depends upon identification of the underlying cause and removal of the pain stimulus.
- If you are struggling with an aggressive horse talk to your veterinary surgeon.

### TREATMENT & PREVENTION

- Treatment relies primarily on first identifying the cause of the aggression.
- Treating fear induced aggression generally involves the use of desensitisation and counter conditioning. The aim of desensitisation is to gradually introduce the cause of the fear at such a low level that the aggressive reaction is not induced. Over time the level of stimulus can be increased until the stimulus does not induce a fear response. Counter conditioning involves producing a response that is behaviourally and physiologically incompatible with the fear response. Good counter conditioners are generally feeds.
- If the aggression is a result of pain or hormonal imbalance then treating the underlying cause will remove the stimulus. This would involve identifying the cause of pain and either resolving it with treatment or managing it long term, if it is not curable, with anti-inflammatory or pain killing pharmaceutical drugs. Hormonal abnormalities can be managed either by neutering, such as in an entire male, or with hormone therapy in a female that may become aggressive when she is cycling during the summer.



### Signs of aggression:

- threat to bite
- ears back or head threat
- threat to strike
- threat to kick
- squeal
- chase
- tail lashing.



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