

Horse Corral

Identifying and Managing Pain in Equines

By Alex Valverde, Equine Advocates Communications Manager

Being in pain or discomfort isn't fun for anyone, including animals. September is Animal Pain Awareness Month, which helps educate and inform caregivers about the importance of identifying and managing pain and discomfort in animals. Whether it's acute or chronic pain, knowing about your animal's health and well-being will greatly improve their quality of life.

The first important thing to know is how to identify pain in animals. Unfortunately, they can't tell us when they're hurt so we need to know the signs. In general, equines are good at hiding pain, so it can be difficult to spot pain signs, especially for those with chronic pain.

"The reason why they're good at masking pain is because they're prey animals," said Equine Advocates Equine Care Manager Melissa Murray. "In the wild an equine that displays outward signs of pain is considered an easy target by predators, so they'll do everything they can to mask pain until it's so significant that they can no longer mask it and that includes domesticated equines because their brain is still wired like a prey animal."

Murray says one of the more obvious signs of pain is limping. If you see your horse limp or move abnormally, like slowly or stiffly, it's important to take a closer look and inspect the hoof and leg. Other signs of pain or discomfort are a horse biting at its sides, dull eyes, pinned back ears, and other signs of general malaise like a sleepy, distraught facial expression. Once you spot one or more of these signs, then it's time to take action.

"That mental checklist you'll run through is going to be based on what the outward presenting signs or symptoms are," said Murray. "So, if the horse is limping the first thing you're going to do is investigate that limb. We're going to check the entire limb and we're going to see if we have swelling. Do we have a wound? And then you want to check their hoof. Is there something in their foot? And then you go from there."

Murray says if a horse shows signs of grogginess or is biting at their sides, it could be a sign of internal pain.

"First thought usually is it's colic when they're biting at their flanks or they're rolling," said Murray. "Then you'll go through and check for other signs of colic from there."

For caretakers who ride their horses, be aware of new behavioral issues as you ride, but don't dismiss them as an "off day." Pain can manifest first as behavioral issues under saddle. Is your horse bucking under saddle? Are they refusing to move forward, or do they stop anywhere suddenly? Are his or her strides shorter than they used to be? Very minute physical issues can be presented under saddle much more quickly than just walking on the ground, so it's important to keep a close eye on changing behavior.

When it comes to chronic pain, Murray says owners should find the horse's baseline lameness, aka how they present on the best of days and how they are most of the time. Then, look out for differences from the baseline.

"When the baseline worsens you know that you have to increase your pain management," said Murray. "At that point, you would be working hand-in-hand with your veterinarian or your veterinary team and that may involve increasing anti-inflammatories or changing them to something that's stronger."

Once you get to know your animal, it'll be easier to notice when something is wrong, so it's important to take time and develop a strong bond with your horse or one you care for. It's also key to develop a good relationship with your veterinarian so they can assist with pain management throughout your equine's life.



The International Veterinary Academy of Pain Management (IVAPM) educates and informs pet owners about their pet's health and well-being when it comes to pain management, be it acute or chronic pain.

IVAPM has proclaimed September as Animal Pain Awareness Month, and this coincides with human medicine's Pain Awareness Month. Animals suffer from pain just like people do. Pain comes in many forms: surgical pain, arthritis and cancer related pain, just to name a few. Acute pain is obvious and distressing. Chronic pain can be subtle, and masked as "getting old" or "slowing down." Old age is not a disease, but pain is. There are many options to treat the various causes of pain in animals including pain medications, physical rehabilitation, acupuncture, laser therapy, and therapeutic massage.

The proclamation of the month is in keeping with IVAPM's commitment to encouraging pain management for all animal species through education and advocacy. During this annual campaign, IVAPM is also encouraging various veterinary organizations to raise public awareness about pain and pain management as it pertains to veterinary patients. <https://ivapm.org>