

Headshaking – Head-shaking – Head Shaking ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE

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HEADSHAKING (HEAD-SHAKING)

What is it?

This is a problem suffered by horses, which can cause them a great deal of pain and distress and which can render them unrideable. When affected, they can make rapid and jerky flicking movements of the nose or they can make such violent, rapid and massive movements with their heads, in extreme cases, to make it dangerous to be near them. They can also make efforts to strike their faces with their front feet. In milder cases, a short and rapid flick is all that is seen.

This condition appears to be a form of allergic reaction, affecting the nasal chambers, the maxillary sinuses, the frontal sinuses, the trigeminal nerve or combinations of these. In the early days of recognition of the problem, in the 70s and 80s, it was often described as a 'behavioural' problem, which dismissed the horse's terrible anguish and possible pain. It has lately been described, in some circles, as trigeminal neuralgia, since nerve blocks can temporarily stop the problem.

How does it arise?

Triggers for the shaking can be flies and midges, the sight of a cloud of flies or midges, rain drops on the face, snow flakes on the face or in close sight, strong sunlight, strong artificial light and dust or various pollens.

It may be related to some of the idiosyncratic sneezing reflex triggers experienced by humans.

Since the origin may be allergic, events which can adversely affect immune function have to be considered as possible causative agents. Among these must be numbered serious viral illness and [vaccination](#).

Does it respond to treatment?

The AVMC deplors the practice of de-nerving, which has been advocated for this condition. Firstly, the nerve can re-grow, making the mutilation only of temporary benefit. Secondly, the horse relies on the immense sensitivity of lips and muzzle for many behavioural activities, including food selection and eating. We have seen de-nerved horses with their lips hung up on barbed wire or with their muzzles and nostrils caked with food.

A nose veil can help some cases, making them rideable while the veil is in place. In some cases this is ineffective and in some it can be poorly tolerated by the horse.

Steroids and anti-histamines have been used with variable temporary effects, with the risk of side-effects. These drugs also render the horse ineligible for competition.

At the AVMC, we use an integrated programme of [homeopathy](#), [acupuncture](#), [chiropractic manipulation](#), [aromatherapy](#) and [dietary measures](#) to achieve good results in approximately 80% of cases. We believe that this poor result, when compared to many other difficult conditions we treat, is down to the extremely variable nature of this syndrome, with a complex and varied aetiology. However, results have improved over the years, as experience has increased.

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