

Holistic veterinary advice

Talking with Dr. Kelli Taylor

Dr. Kelli Taylor is a 2008 summa cum laude graduate of Washington State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. She was born with a love of horses and has striven to be near them her entire life. She completed an internship in Equine Medicine and Surgery at Pilchuck Veterinary Hospital in Snohomish, Washington this summer and is very excited to be starting as the new associate of Dr. Hannah Evergreen at Evergreen Holistic Veterinary Care. Dr. Taylor currently resides with her husband, cat and horse at their home in Monroe, Washington. When not working, you can find her trail riding or hiking with her husband in the great outdoors of the Pacific northwest. She can be reached through evergreenholisticvet.com.

Q: I keep hearing the term "digital pulse". What is this, and how do I measure it on my horse?

A: We take a horse's digital pulse by feeling for the arterial pulse at the level of the fetlock, much like a nurse feels the inside of your wrist to get your pulse when you go to the doctor. A horse has arteries that run down the back of his legs and crosses over to the outside of the fetlocks in combination with a vein and a nerve. You can feel this vascular-nerve bundle best by lightly applying pressure across the outside back edge of the fetlock.

After you find the cord-like bundle, rest your fingertips there for a few seconds. You should be able to feel a faint pulse. It is called a *digital* pulse because you are feeling the pulse of the palmar or plantar *digital* arteries. It should be a faint pulse in normal horses but will become a strong, bounding pulse in horses with issues going on in their feet or lower limbs, such as a sole abscess or laminitis.

Q: The vet always seems to have a hard time finding the vein on my horse for her IV injections or when drawing blood. Like humans, can some horses have "small veins"? And along those lines, are there ways to help make the vein more visible (i.e. warm blanket around the neck or something)? My horse is starting to really hate all the poking and prodding.

A: When I have difficulty finding a vein, it is not because the vein is unusually small, but because the horse has a thick neck or is very tense. It sounds like your horse is not a fan of needles, so this may be the situation in your case. Often, horses will anticipate the feel of the needle as soon as the veterinarian touches the neck or strokes the vein. This causes them to tense up their neck muscles and makes the vein very difficult to visualize and feel, which in turn makes it difficult to hit.

Working with your horse by stroking the vein and touching the neck in the spot where your vet is usually trying to draw blood or inject something will help desensitize him and hopefully dispel some of his anticipation of pain every time he is touched in that spot. Also, teaching your horse to drop his head can be helpful; that way, when he tenses up, you can ask him to drop his head. This relaxes the neck muscles and makes the vein much easier to see and feel and therefore hit.

Q: My horse knocked out one of her front teeth during her turnout time. Will this affect her ability to eat? Do I need to be concerned about whether or not the whole tooth has come out?

A: The front teeth, or incisors, are mainly used by horses to bite off grass for chewing with their molars (cheek teeth). Many horses do just fine after losing an incisor and have no trouble grazing or chewing their hay or grain. A question for you: how old is your horse? Horses lose a set of baby teeth incisors just like people. If she is very young, a permanent tooth will come in and replace the lost baby tooth.

Your veterinarian should check your horse's incisors as part of an annual dental exam. He will probably have to occasionally grind down the opposing incisor since it now lacks a tooth opposite to it. If the tooth was just chipped and the fracture entered the pulp cavity, there is a good chance the remaining tooth will die and need to be pulled. Your veterinarian can also do this.

Q: My horse recently had an allergic reaction to something, resulting in small hives over her back and hindquarters. The hair over the spots where the hives were has come off with the scabs, leaving raw skin and some sores. Would it be okay to put a saddlepad/saddle over the area to ride her? Should I be concerned with the skin becoming infected?

A: I would recommend an exam by your veterinarian. I am concerned this was more than an allergic reaction and that she may have an infection that is causing the raw spots and sores. Typically, an allergic reaction results in urticaria (or hives), which are circular, hair covered, raised spongy lesions caused by dilation of capillaries that allow fluid to leak into the surrounding tissue. The hives resolve when the body reabsorbs the excess fluid. It is rare to have hives that go on to create scabs and sores.

In your horse's case, where there are open sores, I would not place a saddle over top of them even with a pad. Movement and pressure from the saddle and your body weight will cause discomfort to your horse and delay healing.

Q: My mare has been showing signs of being in heat non-stop for the past few months. Should I be concerned?

A: If your mare is showing continual signs of true estrus (or heat), such as squatting with her tail raised, urinating and "winking", you should have her examined by a veterinarian. Your vet will perform a complete reproductive exam, which will include palpation and ultrasound of the uterus and ovaries via the rectum, to look for abnormalities. If your mare is displaying more aggressive or stallion-like behavior or is more moody than normal, these changes may be purely behavioral in nature but an exam by your veterinarian will help you determine that.

One cause of behavioral changes and persistent estrus in mares can be a granulosa cell tumor of the ovary. These are slow-growing, benign tumors that are hormonally active. That is, they secrete a variety of hormones normally produced by the ovary in greater amounts. An elevated amount of estrogen in the blood may cause a mare to exhibit persistent estrus, whereas an elevated amount of testosterone may cause stallion-like behavior. Other hormones produced by the ovary include inhibin and progesterone, which in excess can prevent ovulation and cause the mare to show no heat cycle at all. In addition to a reproductive exam by your veterinarian, there is a blood test available for diagnosis of a granulosa cell tumor. This blood test measures the levels of inhibin, testosterone and progesterone in your mare's blood and compares them to a normal non-pregnant mare reference range. Inhibin is elevated in 90% of mares with a granulosa

cell tumor. Treatment is by surgical removal. This is usually done standing via laparoscopy and requires only a one or two night stay at a surgical facility.

Another differential diagnosis to consider in older horses is Equine Cushing's Syndrome or Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction. Cushing's syndrome is caused by a tumor within the pituitary gland. The pituitary gland, like the ovary, normally secretes a variety of hormones and other chemicals, some of which affect the reproductive system. Abnormal elevations or decreases in these hormones due to cancerous cells or destruction of normal cells, respectively, can cause abnormal reproductive behavior including persistent estrus signs. Diagnosis of Equine Cushing's Syndrome includes a set of clinical signs (abnormal hair coat shedding patterns, excessive water consumption, excessive urination, and excessive sweating) in combination with a blood test measuring endogenous ACTH levels. The clinical signs may be alleviated via treatment with Pergolide, an oral medication.

Q: My horse loves to eat snow. Is this bad for him?

A: Snow is formed by water vapor in the clouds moving around by winds through increasingly cooling temperatures. The water molecules require a microscopic piece of dust, called a nucleator, in order to join together to form a crystal. It is this piece of dust that we worry about; many areas, including the pristine Arctic, have been contaminated with agricultural pesticides through polluted snowfall. It would be best if your horse does not eat snow, but it can be pretty hard to prevent that from happening. A little bit here and there should not be harmful, but we do not know what problems these toxins can cause if they build up within the system.