

Domestic Horses and Herd Instinct

Domestic horses instinctively want to be in a herd, and readily form herds if maintained on pasture. The desire for contact with other horses can result in horses running back and forth along the fence line or running through the fence if left alone in a field or paddock. Common problems in domestic horses related to their herd instinct may include misbehavior when the handler takes a horse away from the herd or barn, vocalizations and excited inattentive behavior when ridden alone. Stalled horses may exhibit similar behaviors when they do not have visual contact with other horses, or are left alone in the barn. Habitual behaviors such as weaving (exaggerated shifting of the horse's weight between the forelegs), head tossing (moving the head in a vertical or vertical to horizontal plane often with considerable force) and stall walking (traversing an set area in a specific pattern) also may be caused by separation anxiety in the horse.



Mares and their foals usually form tight bonds which require special handling. When moving mares, it is important to make sure that their foals (especially younger foals) are awake and following their dams before the move. A young foal which suddenly finds itself alone is prone to run through fences in its haste to find its dam. Likewise, weaning time can be stressful to both mare and foal and may result in injuries if not handled carefully.



Domestic horses have the same response to perceived danger as feral horses. An alarm reaction from one horse in a riding group often results in bolting of other horses in the group. Similarly, if the horses in a riding group are halted when one horse bolts, the bolting horse usually is brought back under control more easily. Horses which avoid being caught by running from the handler can cause the whole herd to begin this irritating behavior. If horses are running, handlers should either wait until they stop running to attempt to catch them or pen the horses in a smaller area where they can be caught easily.