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Ask the EXPERTS

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MEET THIS MONTH'S EXPERTS

Welcome to our **Ask the Experts section**. Here we find the answers to your questions by going to those in the industry who know best. Here's this month's panel of experts, charged with answering all of your horsey dilemmas. This issue we tackle biting, feeding, dressage and behaviour.



Feeding p88

Joanna Palmer is a nutritionist for Allen & Page Quality Horse Feeds. This month she answers questions on gastric ulcers and nutritionally poor hay. For more information visit allenandpage.com



Behaviour p90

Sarah Clark BSc (Hons) SEBC PTC is a registered Equine Behaviour Consultant. She has a wealth of equine experience and is passionate about helping owners understand and improve their horse's behaviour. Visit helpwithhorsebehaviour.co.uk



Dressage p94

Alison Kenward is a BHS accredited coach who specialises in dressage and freestyle choreography. She rides and trains her horses from her base in Northamptonshire.



Biting p96

Heather Hyde is the founder of Neue Schule Bits and has been involved in assessing the needs of horses and their riders for many years. For more information visit avansce.com

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Horses who snap see page 90



Feeding
JOANNA PALMER
nutritionist for Allen & Page



Even if the hay is of poor nutritional quality your horse should be given plenty of it

Poor hay

How can I compensate for nutritionally poor hay with a good doer? **Linda Bank, Cornwall**

Nutritionally poor hay will be deficient in many essential micronutrients. To compensate for this, supplementing a good doer's forage-based diet with a low-calorie bucket feed that is balanced with vitamins and minerals will ensure the horse receives a balanced diet.

Regardless of its nutritional quality, hay must be of good physical quality and there should be plenty of it. Hay that's dusty or mouldy shouldn't be fed to horses

as it is likely to have an adverse effect on a horse's health.

Not only can dust and mould spores cause breathing difficulties, but if hay is unpalatable the horse will eat less than he needs, which has a negative effect on digestive health.

That said, providing it's palatable, hay with a low nutritional value can be beneficial for good doers as it will be lower in calories and therefore less likely to promote unwanted weight gain. Soaking hay for 12 hours will significantly reduce its nutritional value, making it ideal to feed to a good doer to provide a continuous supply of fibre without the calorie level of grass or unsalted hay.

Building condition

I've bought a new horse but his condition is quite poor. His ribs are showing and although his teeth have been deemed OK by a vet, I'm wondering how I can build condition without creating a hot horse? **Karlie Scott, Northumberland**

Energy and calories are the same thing and it's not possible to feed a high-calorie feed to promote weight gain without giving your horse more energy. Focus on the ingredients within the feed that are important when it comes to determining the type of energy that is provided and whether the feed could lead to your horse becoming excitable.

Focus on the fibre

Before looking at bucket feeds to build condition it is important to ensure your horse has a constant supply of good-quality fibre. Not only

is fibre essential for good digestive health, its digestion also provides a good source of calories. As the fibre ferments in the gut, this produces a heat

that helps to keep the horse warm. If insufficient, fibre is being consumed the horse is more likely to feel the cold and have to use other energy sources to keep warm, so weight loss or failure to gain weight is inevitable, however many high-calorie bucket feeds you give him. Providing ad-lib hay or haylage when he's stabled or when grazing is poor is the best way to ensure your horse has a continuous supply of fibre.

Conditioning feed

In addition to ad-lib forage, a high-calorie conditioning feed – one that's high in fibre and low in starch and sugar – would provide energy for your horse's workload and help him gain weight and reach an ideal body condition score. Avoid feeds that contain a high proportion of cereals as they will have higher starch levels compared to those that use fibre and oil as energy sources.

Not only can a high-starch diet cause fizzy behaviour, it's also more difficult for your horse to digest and leaves him more susceptible to laminitis and colic. A high-calorie conditioning feed that's cereal grain free and uses unmolassed sugar beet and linseed will be lower in starch and sugar than cereal-based mixes.

Choosing a feed that contains prebiotics and probiotics is also useful in promoting good digestive health.



A horse in poor condition will need more calories, particularly from fibrous sources

GOOD TO KNOW

Feeding a small meal of hay or chaff shortly before exercise can be beneficial for horses prone to ulcers as it creates a mat of fibre that sits on top of the stomach contents

Tummy trouble

My horse has ulcers. Do I need to adjust his feed – I heard salt licks can help? **Karl Easton, Essex**

The key to feeding an ulcer-prone horse is a diet that's high in fibre and low in starch. Any supplementary bucket feed should also follow the same high-fibre, low-starch rule. Fibre is not only a vital source of nutrition, but is essential for a healthy digestive system.

In the wild, horses graze for up to 18 hours a day and it's important that this 'trickle' feed of fibrous food is replicated for our domesticated horses. A stomach continually filled with fibre is much less likely to develop ulcers than one that remains empty for long periods of time. When a horse is stabled or his grazing is poor he should be offered ad-lib hay. Hay is more appropriate than haylage for a horse prone to ulcers as haylage has a lower pH, making it more acidic.

The lowdown on licks

While a balanced diet is essential and a salt lick is a good idea for all horses, it's not beneficial in terms of preventing ulcers. The licking behaviour will not produce the quantities of saliva required for a healthy digestive system. Saliva contains a large amount of bicarbonate, which is alkaline and has a neutralising effect on stomach acid. However, since horses only produce saliva when they're actively chewing, long periods without food will increase the risk of developing ulcers, which means a salt lick won't help.

Small meals

Fibrous forage like hay requires more chewing than mixes or cubes do, and this is one of the reasons why performance horses – who are often fed less fibre and more concentrate feed than leisure horses – are more susceptible to ulcers. Feeding a small meal of hay or chaff shortly before exercise can be beneficial

Watch the starch

Cereals contain large amounts of starch and are good sources of instant energy, but a high-starch intake is associated with an increased risk of ulcers as the fermentation of starch produces volatile fatty acids. These reduce the effectiveness of the mucosal layer that protects against the effects of gastric acid in the stomach. If your horse requires more calories to fuel work and maintain an ideal weight, then can be provided by forage alone, it's highly beneficial to choose a concentrate feed that is cereal grain-free and instead uses fibre and oil as energy sources. Keep starch intake down to less than 2g per kg of bodyweight per day and split any concentrate feeds into several smaller meals given throughout the day.

Contrary to popular belief, salt licks won't help a horse who has ulcers



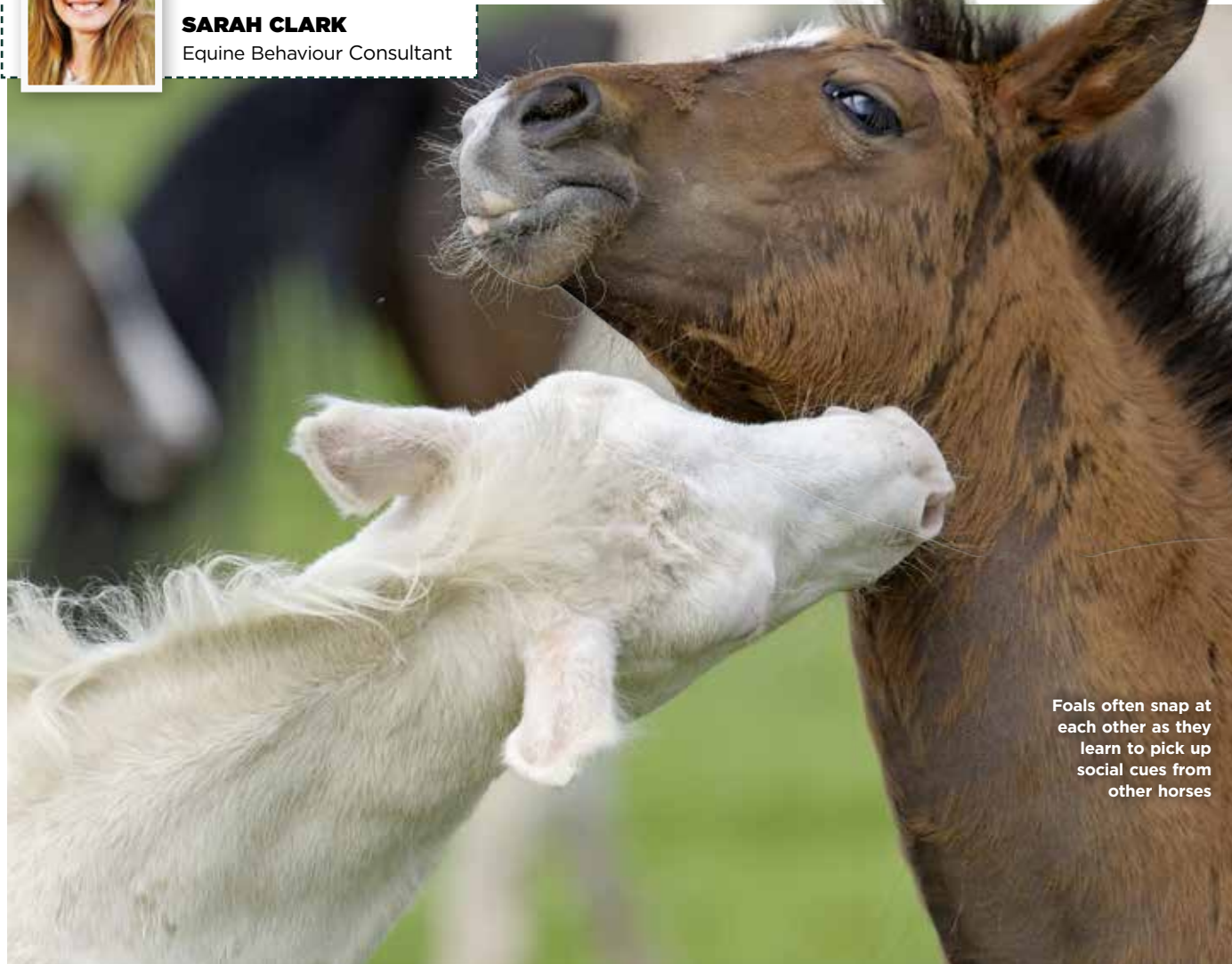
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Behaviour

SARAH CLARK

Equine Behaviour Consultant



Foals often snap at each other as they learn to pick up social cues from other horses

Crocodile snapping

Q My horse has developed this habit of snapping the air when he's upset. It's most apparent when other horses walk past his stable. Why is this happening and how can I stop it?

Harriet Minster, Warwickshire

A From what you describe your horse could be showing a less common type of 'STP' (stereotypic behaviour pattern). Ordinarily known as a 'stable vice', an STP can be a sign that there's something specific in his environment making him feel stressed, anxious, frustrated or even excited.

If he's a youngster

Without knowing about his

environment or his history it's hard to diagnose exactly, but it's also possible he's 'foal snapping'. This is rarely seen in adult horses, however. Foals do this as part of natural 'equine etiquette' when they're learning from other horses. It's a submissive gesture which, roughly translated, means "I'm respecting that you're older" or "I'm still learning". Occasionally they don't grow out of it.

Try these tips

- It can be a challenge but try to find the specific trigger for your horse's behaviour. This is key to stopping it from happening. From what you describe, his behaviour is likely to have a 'social' motive. Wanting a horse to keep their distance, or wanting to be with others, are just two possibilities.
- Can he spend more time at liberty – in other words, away from his stable? As a naturally sociable, grazing

herbivore, this can really help.

- Is it possible for other horses to use an alternative route? If not, you could try feeding him towards the rear of his stable at times when others are likely to pass by.

By performing an STP, the horse actually calms himself. It's similar to when a person taps their foot or bites their nails. As horse lovers we don't ideally want to see these behaviours, but the repetitive action of an STP helps at least to relax the horse. Physically preventing STPs (such as using crib collars or weave grills) can actually cause more stress to the horse. So, if making changes to his environment is impossible, at least you know he may be self-calming by doing this.

If you're still concerned, it's safest to seek long-term advice. Find a local SEBC professional at societyofequinebehaviourconsultants.org.uk



Behaviour

CONTINUED...

Horses who are food aggressive need routine to settle them



Hungry horse

Q My horse has to have a restricted diet because of Cushing's, so she gets quite aggressive and anxious around food and the people on my yard complain that she's like this because she's so hungry. It's important we keep her weight down, but is there anything we can do to improve her mood generally, particularly her tendency to box walk and kick the door around dinner time!

Lara Parkers, Dunbar

A Rest assured what you're experiencing with your mare is pretty common. Feeding a restricted diet while at the same time keeping your horse calm and happy can seem a challenge. The good news is there's lots you can do to help her.

Door kicking is usually a learned behaviour. It's difficult for us to ignore incessant door kicking, but by feeding something to pacify or even by shouting "Quiet!" we pay more attention to the horse and they learn quickly that kicking the door brings what they want, faster!

The box walking behaviour you describe indicates that rather than being hungry, she may be feeling frustrated, anxious or excited.

We know that mostly animals love routine. By keeping a very strict routine however, we make a rod for our own backs. This is because some horses quickly learn to anticipate and this is when frustration or

anxiety-linked behaviours can creep in.

The solutions lie in tweaking your mare's routine so any anticipation or frustration is kept to a minimum. Increasing her time in freedom and eating forage is key.

Tips to lighten her mood around food

- Try moving her away from her stable before any food anticipation behaviour starts. Could you take her for a walk or pop her and a good friend in an arena for a bit of extra 'horsey time'? It's best she comes in to find her food already there. That way you minimise any anticipatory behaviour. Horses learn fast to associate certain triggers with receiving food. This could be someone approaching with a bowl, or just the sound of the feed bin. Even other horses looking alert around 'that time' of the day can be enough to

trigger her unwanted behaviour. A useful rule of thumb is to ignore bad behaviour (if safe to do so) and reward good.

- If safe to, firmly attach rubber matting or thick sponge to the inside of her door to quieten the door kicking. The padding will make it easier for everyone to ignore her and, in turn, help re-educate her not to kick, as well as prevent any concussion
- Giving her an empty feed bowl if she door kicks can also help. She will stop brain linking the 'reward' of food with her behaviour of kicking, as you'll be changing the consequence for her. Feeding her only once she stands still and quietly will teach her a new 'reward' for her good behaviour

Naturally horses would spend at least 12 hours a day grazing, so follow these tips to increase the time she spends eating while at the same time keeping her weight down:

- Use small-holed hay nets, spread around the stable.
- Soak hay, which will reduce its nutritional content and take longer for her to eat.
- Avoid feed bowls and scatter feed instead. Foraging is a more natural way to eat, will avoid bolting and help keep her stimulated for a longer time.



Dressage
ALISON KENWARD
BHS accredited coach

Bitless to bitted

Q My horse has mostly been ridden bitless, but now I'm transitioning over to bitted riding. Is there anything I can do to help him accept the bit so he's submissive when we start dressage training?

Belinda Wind, Staffordshire

A Your horse will have learnt about contact and rein aids working in a bitless bridle, so you don't need to worry too much about making the switch. Your priority in this transitional phase is to help your horse accept the new bit in his mouth and to understand and trust your hands.

Converse with the reins

Concentrate on encouraging your horse to work in a regular rhythm around your arena. Include circles, changes of rein and patterns such as serpentines to help promote balance and suppleness. These are all good ways to develop the conversation you have through the reins.

When you start your transition work, ride transitions in different places in your arena to improve the balance. If you always transition on a straight line, try asking for one in a corner and vice versa. Prepare your horse for a transition by riding half-halts to rebalance and focus him.

Transitions are a proven way to develop communication with your horse as well as testing the timing of your aids and your horse's understanding of what you're asking. Remember your aids encouraging your horse to seek, accept and feel confidence in your hands and the bit.



Going from bitless to bitted shouldn't affect your horse if your contact and rein aids are all correct.

GOOD TO KNOW

Riding circles and changes of rein help to promote balance and suppleness, and are all good ways to develop the conversation you have through the reins.

He leans right!

Q How can I stop my horse hanging on the right rein? I've had his back, teeth and saddle checked recently. I've done lots of transitions and lateral work that seems to help, but do you have any other suggestions?

Tiffany Marks, Yorkshire

A While you're warming up, take a minute to ask yourself two questions: **Am I sitting evenly?** **Do I have an equal rein length?**

This will help you to assess your position and how that may be influencing your horse. When a horse hangs on one rein, it has often become a habit. He might resist working in a different way until it becomes familiar and he feels confident that he can maintain his balance.

It takes time and patience to teach a horse to work in a new frame, so make sure you include plenty of variety in your sessions and encourage regular rest and relaxation breaks, such as stretching in walk.

How to solve it

First of all, you need to check your horses' response to your leg aids in walk on the right rein and determine if he moves away from your right leg. To begin:

- In walk, ride away from the track, slow your horse down and ask him to move away from your leg, riding a turnabout the forehand (to do this, see page 42-43)
- Make sure your hands allow him the freedom to seek the rein contact, before moving into medium walk again



Try riding in different places in the arena to help lighten your horse's forehand.



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Check your rein length and whether your horse seems to favour one rein over the other.

Balancing a giant

Q I've got a 17th Warmblood who struggles to balance his forehand. How can I lighten his forehand in canter?

Joy Dunhelm, Staffordshire

A A big horse sometimes finds working in an arena a challenge because maintaining his balance in a small space is difficult. It can be helpful to include more canter work in larger spaces or while out hacking, if it's safe to do so.

The plan of action

STEP 1: You'll need to improve his balance and suppleness so that he is able to lighten his forehand in canter. Think

- Try to resist the temptation to allow him to become heavy in your right hand by squeezing with your legs and encouraging him to step more actively forwards
- Ask for trot and concentrate on maintaining a regular rhythm
- Return to walk and repeat the exercise two or three times on each rein.

The next step is to position your horse in slight shoulder-fore on the long side and assess how he's coping before he loses balance. Circle away to help him reconnect. This exercise can be ridden in all three paces by varying the size of the circle depending on the pace, so that the circle is easy for him. As a guide, a 10m circle in walk, 15m circle in trot and 20m in canter for a prelm./ovice horse works well. With improved balance and suppleness, over time you can decrease the size of the circle.

about the quality of your upward and downwards transitions and his understanding of your aids. See if he feels comfortable repeating the transitions in different/tighter places in the arena. This will test that he is on the aids and gives you the opportunity to praise him for his efforts.

STEP 2: Ask him to lengthen his stride in canter on a 20m circle and then shorten his stride by gradually spiralling down to 15m.

STEP 3: Allow him to walk and stretch before repeating the exercise on the other rein. It will take time for him to develop the fitness and strength to repeat the exercise.



Bitting

HEATHER HYDE
founder of Neue Schule Bits

Too many bits?

Q I've heard that it's good to have multiple bits, so you can change them when your horse is behaving differently. What are the staple bits that I should have in my kit?

Lizzy Knight, Oxfordshire

A A common question asked by riders is: "Why is my horse now evading his bit when initially he was so happy?"

We refer to this as your comfortable working window, which differs with individual horses owing to varying degrees of sensitivity. I would recommend having two bits. If your horse is never strong, then two snaffles with different mouthpiece designs are recommended. If you apply the same pressure points within the mouth on a regular basis, these contact areas may become de-sensitised - changing between



It's a good idea to have a variety of bits to suit your horse's different needs

two bits in this way helps to eliminate this.

Three-ring bits

If you do need more control for faster work then another option is upgrading to a three-ring which, when the rein is attached to the bottom ring, places greater pressure on the poll when you ask your horse to stop.

If you suspect your horse is poll sensitive, then simply use a wider-shaped headpiece, which will spread and reduce the pressure.

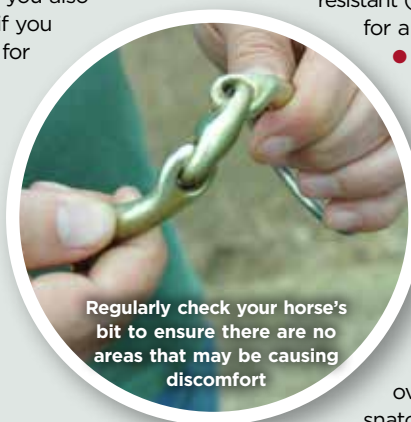
Another method of limiting poll pressure is to use the curb strap on the top ring. When fitted correctly this will restrict the lever action, ensuring that no more than 1kg of poll pressure is exerted.

Bothered by the bit

Q How can I tell if my horse finds his bit uncomfortable?

Janice Middleton, Edinburgh

A All horses need regular checks from the dentist, farrier, saddle fitter and physio. A comfy girth and correctly fitted bridle are also essential. As the frequent rider, you also factor here, because if you know what is normal for your horse, you will easily recognise when things are going wrong. A horse that is comfortable in the mouth should willingly stretch into the contact through equally balanced reins. He should be rhythmical and consistent in the contact and we now have a scientific tool where all four components can be measured and recorded. Bear in mind that if we don't have forward movement and the horse isn't stretching into the contact, we won't have the foundation to further our training.



Regularly check your horse's bit to ensure there are no areas that may be causing discomfort

What to look for

If a horse isn't comfortable in the contact, he will develop ways to evade it, such as:

- He may set his neck and block through the rein. He may overbend and work behind the vertical, or be unwilling to take any weight through the rein.
- He may invert, hollow the back and come above the bit, or he may become resistant (head toss) when you ask for a downward transition.
- He may develop a busy mouth, chomping and chewing and even grabbing the bit.
- He may cross his jaw and set totally against you.
- He may develop tongue evasion - pushing down on the bit, putting the tongue out to the side, over the top or even snatching down.
- Extreme discomfort could lead to rearing and bolting.

Solving the problem

Issues rooted elsewhere in the anatomy often present through the mouth. First and foremost, get your horse checked

by a vet, dentist, physiotherapist, farrier and a saddle fitter and heed their advice.

Next, try riding bitless to see if the problems still occur when the bit isn't present. When doing this you need to ride in the same frame as when you have a bit, or it won't be a true comparison.

You could also ride without a saddle, which would help to eliminate any issues with the back, saddle and girth.

The noseband can have a huge impact, so changing nosebands is worth trying. A narrow headpiece can cause discomfort to the poll, so more padded or shaped headpieces are another option to try.

If you conclude the issue is within the mouth, thoroughly check all of the flesh. Rubs inside or outside the lips and cheeks are common. If there is any damage, don't use a bit until it is healed fully and then a change of bit may be necessary to avoid the sensitive areas. Check the tongue for damage and the bars for bruising too.

We recommend that you check your horse's mouth daily, much like you do the feet, so you'll know if anything is different.

If there is still nothing to be seen, it's worth having the mouth X-rayed. Even the best dentist won't be able to see shards or roots of tooth under the gum line without diagnostic procedures.

If you want to evaluate the contact you have through the reins, you can find out more at avansce.com



Bitting

CONTINUED...



You'll need to determine why your horse keeps putting his tongue over the bit before you can stop it

Tongues out!

Q My horse puts his tongue over his bit a lot. How can I stop this from happening?

Lara Vernon, Falmouth

A First, we need to know why this is happening.

A Is it stress?

B A random habit?

C Is he evading an uncomfortable bit?

D Is the mouthpiece lying too far forwards on the tongue?

E Is he being clever and evading the bit?

A) Stress

Stressful situations are often difficult to solve. You'll need to talk to your trainer and figure out how you can keep your horse calm. Once he is confident and fully understands what you're asking this tongue evasion should disappear.

There is no substitute for basic training. If the rider doesn't apply the aids correctly or the horse doesn't fully

understand them, then that needs to be worked on first.

B) Random habit

A more comfortable mouthpiece that is situated further back in the mouth may help with this.

C) Feeling uncomfortable

There are many clever mouthpieces that are designed for tongue relief. Consult an expert and try some of the newer designs that are specifically intended for a sensitive tongue. Bear in mind the tongue is a muscle and usually capable of sustained pressure.

No matter how mild the bit is, if we use the same contact areas over a period of time the tongue may become desensitised, so swapping mouthpieces and pressure points may be the solution.

D) Mouthpiece difficulties

If the mouthpiece sits too far forwards on the tongue, it will irritate your horse. This is exacerbated if the horse has a

short smile; that is, he is short from the commissures (corner of the lip) to his muzzle. Do check that your cheek pieces are adjusted correctly, but make sure you don't over-tighten them as this will only cause discomfort and create additional pressure in the corners of the mouth and at the poll. This sort of excessive tension will also mask your rein aids.

E) Evasion

If you know for sure that your horse is putting his tongue over the bit to ignore your aids then consider a double-jointed bit, such as a universal. The universal has a lever/pulley action and a combination noseband generally works as it fastens above and below the mouthpiece.

A tongue grid can be useful. You will need a slip headpiece to attach this. This is independent of the rein aids and lies much further back in the mouth. It stops the horse drawing his tongue far enough back to pop it over the top. Bear in mind that horses do not have a gag reflex, so they usually accept this quite readily.



Bitting

CONTINUED...

Metal medley

Q Does the type of metal make a difference to how my horse works on the bit?

Edith Curtis, York

A Many riders have experienced their horses acting differently to different metals. There is no 'best' material for your horse, as responses will always vary, and there are pros and cons with each one.

Most riders will want to achieve good, clear communication through the rein and comfort for their horse, but finding a refined communication, softer rein aids and a listening, responsive horse can be tricky.

Rubber and plastic

Rubber and plastic mouthpieces can be good for a sensitive mouth. However, as they don't slide over the skin as readily as metal, they have a tendency to rub. Also, if your horse chews on the bit it may become rough, sharp and injure his mouth. For safety, always ensure your bit has a metal core as these are harder for a horse to break through.

Stainless steel

Stainless steel is a popular and hard-wearing metal, but it does, by comparison, take



Metals do make a difference, so pay attention to what each one does when you buy a bit

longer to heat up in the mouth, so warm it up in your hand on a cold day. Owing to its hardness, stainless steel is more likely to cause damage and wear and tear to the horse's teeth than a slightly softer metal.

Sweet metal

Horses tend to accept these more readily because they mouth on them and they encourage the horse to produce more saliva. In fact, horses produce 35-40 litres of saliva every 24 hours, but we only need enough saliva to act as a lubricant. If the horse is over-salivating, not only will this excessive

dribble irritate him, but it prevents him from breathing and swallowing at the same time, which may well affect performance. As for the mouthing, do you really want to encourage a busy mouth?

Making the decision

As riders, we have the means to evaluate the various benefits of these claims and delve into the scientific research behind them. But bear in mind that at the end of the day we're all working toward softer aids and a more responsive horse. This will never be achieved if your horse is uncomfortable.



Advice from Clare Barfoot of Spillers®, proud sponsors of Ask the Experts

Controlling calories

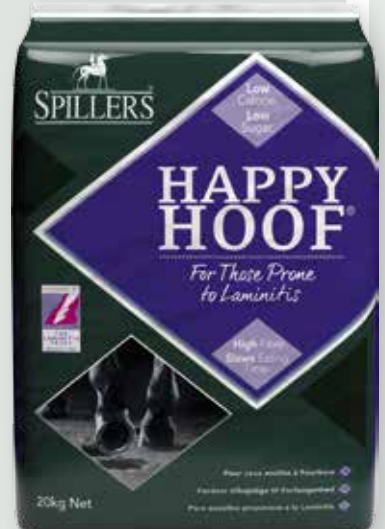
STACEY ROLPH'S IRISH Sport Horse, Jumbo, is a good doer and gained a few too many kilos over the winter. She's now worrying about the risks of the spring grass. Stacey says Jumbo has always been a very good doer so ideally she should have let him lose weight over the winter. She struggled this year though - weeks of snow meant he was stabled for longer than usual and had less exercise. Now the days are longer Stacey is riding for at least an hour every day. Jumbo is also being turned out

daily onto restricted grazing, but the dilemma is what to feed him when he is stabled overnight.

Currently he has soaked, double-netted hay but he eats it quickly, then starts kicking the stable door in protest, which the yard owner, who lives on site, isn't overjoyed about! Stacey could consider giving Jumbo several scoops of a low calorie, low starch and sugar, fibre-based feed as a hay replacer when he comes in at night. This will provide controlled, reduced calories, unlike the variable calories in hay. She could then

ask the yard owner to give Jumbo his net of soaked hay last thing at night to help keep him occupied and hopefully distract him from kicking his door!

SPILLERS® HAPPY HOOF® is a low calorie, short-chop forage containing all the vitamins and minerals needed for good health. It can be used as a partial or total replacement for hay and helps extend eating time. SPILLERS® HAPPY HOOF® is approved by The Laminitis Trust and has been used successfully in important laminitis studies.



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