

Why Horses Kick –

By Jennifer Williams, PhD

Here's what your horse's kicking means and what you can do to deal with this potentially dangerous behavior.



Sometimes horses kick out of simple playfulness.

The kick is one of your horse's most powerful forms of communication. Just as pinned ears or bared teeth send unmistakable messages, a kick--or even the threat of one--speaks volumes about a horse's state of mind or his physical well-being.

Of course, the sheer mechanical force of an equine kick underscores that it is an urgent message. Emergency room personnel have likened the destructive potential of an equine kick to that of the impact of a small automobile moving at 20 miles per hour. A kick can shatter bones and traumatize soft tissue. In fact, medical journals document people going into cardiac arrest after sustaining a kick to the chest. In addition, a horse can seriously injure himself by kicking; a powerful impact with a cinder block wall, for example, can fracture bones within the hoof.

So if you have a horse who kicks, habitually, periodically or even only occasionally, it's important to figure out the reasons behind the behavior. Some situations will compel practically any horse to lash out--to protect himself or to relieve pain--but in other cases kicking is a bad habit that must be addressed before someone is hurt.

Generally, a kick delivers one of six messages. To discern which one your horse is sending, you'll need to closely observe his body language, take stock of the circumstances leading up to a kick and identify factors that may be contributing to the behavior.

Message: "I feel threatened." "I feel good." "I hurt." or "Back off."

A horse who kicks while being ridden is usually reacting to another horse who has gotten too close to his hind end. How close is too close varies with each horse's personality. Some, particularly dominant mares, are very strict about their personal space and take offense when any horse comes within 20 feet of their hindquarters. Another horse may become agitated only when a herdmate draws within a foot of his tail.

I know many horses who have never kicked at a person but will not hesitate to take aim at a horse who comes up on their rear on the trail or in the show ring. Tailgating kicks are typically mild "warning" kicks but can still be powerful enough to break the bones of any rider who might take the brunt of the blow.

Because of this potential for injury, it's never a good idea to allow kicking under saddle to go without correction, even if a kick seems justified. When a horse you are riding kicks out, instantly give him a sharp pop with a crop or the end of the reins to let him know it isn't acceptable. The correction must be immediate, however, so he will make the appropriate connection.

If your horse has kicked under saddle before, you need to take special precautions to protect others. First, tie a red ribbon around his tail to warn that he is a kicker. Also, when riding in a group, position yourself at the back.

Finally, as much as possible stay out of crowded arenas or CRI areas and be extra vigilant about where you are in relation to other riders, keeping your horse's focus on you and your aids. It is your responsibility to protect the other riders, not their responsibility to avoid you.

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