

INFORMATION SERIES

Your Horse's Sleep

Learn how proper sleep environments can support your horse's wellbeing and behaviour.

with JENNI NELLIST
Certificated Clinical Animal Behaviourist



jenninellist.co.uk | 07974 569407 | jenni@jenninellist.co.uk

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The Importance of Sleep for Horses

Sleep is essential for all living beings, including horses, as it is the period when the body rests, repairs, and prepares for the challenges ahead. All bodily systems rely on quality sleep to function at their best. When sleep is lacking, it can become a serious issue that should not be ignored.

Natural Sleep Patterns of Horses



Horses are crepuscular animals, meaning they are most active in the periods surrounding dawn and dusk. As a result, their sleep typically occurs in the middle of the day and the middle of the night. Unlike humans, who usually sleep in one long stretch, horses have a polyphasic sleep pattern. This means they sleep in multiple short bouts, which can last from as little as half an hour to a few hours at a time. Horses need around 5 hours sleep in every 24 hours.

Horses choose to sleep when they feel most comfortable. For horses living outdoors, this often coincides with the most comfortable or sheltered weather conditions. If weather conditions disrupt their usual sleep windows, they will adjust by sleeping outside their typical times to make up for the lost rest.

If weather conditions disrupt their usual sleep windows, they will adjust by sleeping outside their typical times to make up for the lost rest. We might accidentally impair this by taking a tired horse out to ride when they would have chosen to catch up on lost sleep.

Horses begin by standing in a comfortable location and becoming drowsy.

They shift into a series of slow wave sleep bouts, interspersed with very short periods of wakefulness as they monitor their surroundings to make sure it's safe to sleep.

Once slow wave sleep progresses horses lie down. This is usually lying "sternally", lying over their breastbone with their head upright.

When they move into REM sleep, they may remain in that position and their chin drops to the floor or their folded forelimb, or they roll onto their side, into "lateral recumbency". You may see their eyes rolling and their limbs twitching.

When lying down sleep is complete, they will get up, often rolling first. Then either stand at rest a while longer or move into grazing or foraging.



Providing an Appropriate Sleep Environment



How to help your horse:

- **Horses may share sleeping spaces if they are comfortable with each other; otherwise, provide a stable or at least an area the size of a 15m circle per horse.**
- **Horses need a well-drained area, and if inside, deep straw or shavings bedding (or similar).**
- **Preferred sleeping spots are often on higher ground for better drainage and security.**
- **Shelter from wind and weather is important, use natural features and/or constructed field shelters and wind breaks.**

When managing horses, it is important to provide them with a regular time and a suitable environment for sleep, particularly if consistent performance is expected such as for equestrian sport, or even just to enjoy a safer ride.

If horses are left to the elements, their performance may vary with the weather, fine when it's fine, but it might dip in prolonged inclement weather such as combined wind and rain.

Key requirements for an outdoor enclosure, from fields to track and yard systems, include a well-drained area where horses can lie down, with enough space for each horse—this can be as much as a 15-metre circle per horse. If horses are very comfortable with each other, they may share these spaces, lying down together within a single 15m circle area. However, if the group is not compatible, enough individual space is necessary.

In addition to space, the area should offer good drainage and shelter. Horses often prefer higher ground, which tends to be better drained and offers a good view, allowing them to feel more secure. Shelter from prevailing wind and weather—whether provided by natural features or constructed field shelters—is also important. If natural shelter is insufficient, field shelters or stabling can help meet these needs provided they are of suitable construction to meet both individual and group needs.



Social & Physical Considerations



Lighting

Can't sleep with the lights on? Recent research found no difference in total sleep time between fluorescent tube lighting for 13 to 14 hours during the day, or use of dim red light overnight fading to blue enriched white light for 13 hours during the day. Red light is suggested to be less disturbing for horses where very late nights, or very early morning work mean lights on during hours of darkness. Using red light allows us to see to work work without disturbing the horses.

[Greening et al, 2025. Influence of lighting on sleep behaviour, circadian rhythm and spontaneous blink rate in stabled riding school horses \(Equus caballus\). PloS one, 20\(6\), p.e0326567.](#)

A comfortable place to rest

Horses rest more comfortably when they can see other horses, as it allows them to share the responsibility of watching for danger.

In groups, horses may take turns lying down in deep, dream sleep while others remain alert. In stabled environments, partition designs should allow horses to see and, ideally, touch one another. For groups housed together, ensure there is enough space for all members to lie down. In some cases, a single field shelter may not provide sufficient space if the horses are not comfortable lying close together.

Deep, supportive bedding is crucial inside stables, barns, and shelters. It should cover most of the floor, leaving clear space around the door and water bucket, providing a comfortable area for the horse to lie down. At the same time, the bedding should not cause the horse to stand unevenly for extended periods, such as during standing rest or when eating the forage ration or hay net.



Monitoring and Health-Related Considerations



The sound of music?

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony? This and other classical music, both slow and moderate tempo improve the eating time and serotonin levels of stabled horses. Experiencing Beethoven after 8.30pm in the evening also resulted in more lateral recumbency.

Hartman, N. and Greening, L.M., 2019. A preliminary study investigating the influence of auditory stimulation on the occurrence of nocturnal equine sleep-related behavior in stabled horses. Journal of equine veterinary science, 82, p.102782.

Oliveira et al, 2024. Impact of musical rhythm on blood, physiological and welfare parameters in stabled horses. Scientific Reports, 14(1), p.31311.

If a horse has all their environmental and social needs met but still does not lie down to sleep then health needs to be considered.

Signs such as collapsing, or scuffed knees, fetlocks, and even faces may indicate collapsing. Monitoring sleep is therefore a valuable tool. This can be done using security cameras in stables or wildlife camera traps in off-grid situations. Setting camera traps to record short bouts, such as 20 seconds, can provide enough information about when horses are lying down or not, without quickly filling the memory card.

Collapsing occurs when horses avoid lying down yet become deprived of REM sleep which they can only get lying down. During REM sleep the muscles completely relax and so cannot hold the stay apparatus that holds the horse up in standing rest and slow wave sleep. As the body tries to transition from slow wave sleep to REM sleep, while still standing, the muscles relax and the body drops, forming the collapse. This can range from a very slight sag of the limbs to crashing to the floor.

If your horse is collapsing, and all environmental and social needs are met, then it's likely there is a physical reason for this such as pain preventing the horse from lying down. This deserves veterinary investigation to get to the root cause.

Summary

In summary, sleep is a vital part of your horse's wellbeing.

By ensuring your horse has a well-drained, sheltered, and social environment, and by monitoring their sleep patterns, you can help maintain or facilitate healthy and restful sleep.

More about Jenni

Jenni Nellist is a Certificated Clinical Animal Behaviourist who has been helping with horse problems in South and West Wales since 2005



Want to geek out on more equine sleep science?

Greening, L. and McBride, S., 2022. A review of equine sleep: Implications for equine welfare. Frontiers in veterinary science, 9, p.916737.

CONTACT JENNI VIA WEBSITE



WATCH THE VIDEO IN YOUTUBE

jenni@jenninellist.co.uk

