

ASSESSING PAIN IN HORSES

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The Equine Pain Face

With Karina Beck Group

The facial expressions that can indicate your horse is in pain

Highlights

- Certain facial expressions can indicate a horse is in pain.
- You can use these features to score a 'pain face' as a simple yes/no.
- The intensity of the expression can help you determine the intensity of pain.
- Learning to recognise the equine pain face in horses can help you identify chronic or low grade pain earlier.
- It is relatively easy and feasible for everyone to learn. In a study, after a 20 minute lesson, participants were able to successfully score a pain face (pinched and the pain intensity as 'low', 'medium' and 'high' with an average 42% accuracy).

Five key areas to watch out for

- ears,
- eyes,
- nostrils,
- muzzle and
- facial muscles.

Behaviourally, some horses may become less social when they are in pain, whereas others may seek contact with a person they trust.

Did you know?

Research in the 'Equine Pain Face' area is ongoing and, in future, we will have a facial recognition app to do the work for us!

IMAGES A & B: When a horse is not in pain, there is less tension in the facial expressions. Compare these images with the pain face opposite, paying attention to the ears, eyes, nostrils, muzzle and facial muscles.



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'Pain Face'

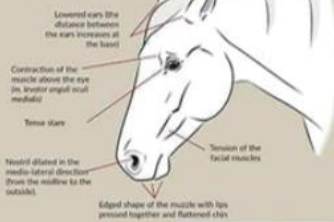


IMAGE C: Can you spot the facial expressions of pain described in the illustration? This horse is in pain.



Find more horse welfare resources at: www.horsesandpeople.com.au



'Relaxed Face'



Read the study titled 'An Equine Pain Face' by Karina B. Clunas, Blain Fickner, Capser Lindquist and Pia Anderson. It is open access and available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/1745-2759-2-22>

Illustration by Andrea Bazzani © Karina Beck Group



Did you know that 47% of horse owners did not recognise pain in their horses?

This was one of the findings of research into lameness and pain assessment during a study of 546 horses. I don't know about you but I find that a bit mind-blowing.

Recognising signs of pain in horses is a skill that every horse owner should have but doesn't know they need. That's because horses are pretty good at hiding their pain.

We recorded a webinar called Learning the language of pain in horse where I delve into a recent review of 4 validated scales designed to measure pain in horses. Follow the steps below to access the recording. I think you will love it.

Go to www.equineecare.com. Scroll down the home page and enter your name and email for instant access to the recording as per the image below

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Overview

These are the 4 “validated” pain scoring methods, specifically highlighting the Composite Pain Scale (CPS). (A validated scale is one that can be repeated by others and elicits consistent responses.)

This scale was found to be the most easily understood and reliable scale of the four although each of them had merit.

The table below is one adapted by a group of Veterinary researchers Lawson, Opie, Stevens, Knowles and Mair and I like it for its simplicity.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Episodes of Tail Flicking (Excluding Flicking to Insects)	Score	Reaction to Palpation of the Painful Area	Score
No tail flicking, tail in normal position	0	No reaction to palpation	0
Occasional tail flicking (1 or 2 episodes/5 min)	1		
Frequent tail flicking (3 or 4 episodes/5 min)	2	Mild reaction to palpation	2
Excessive tail flicking (>4 episodes/5 min) and/or lifts out tail or tail is tucked in	3	Severe reaction to palpation	3
Kicking at Abdomen	Score	Heart Rate	Score
Quietly standing, no kicking	0	32–52 beats/min	0
Looking at abdomen	1	53–60 beats/min	1
Lifting up hind legs, may kick once or twice at abdomen	2	61–68 beats/min	2
Extensive kicking at abdomen (>2 episodes/5 min)	3	>68 beats/min	3
Pawing at Floor	Score	Rectal Temperature	Score
Quietly standing, does not paw at floor	0	35.7–38.0 °C	0
Points limb	1	35.3–35.6 °C or 38.1–38.5 °C	1
Occasional pawing at floor (1 or 2 episodes/5 min)	2	34.7–35.2 °C or 38.6–39.0 °C	2
Extensive pawing at floor (>2 episodes/5 min)	3	<34.6 °C or >39.1 °C	3
Sweating	Score	Digestive Sounds	Score
No signs of sweating	0	Normal motility	0
		Decreased motility	1
Signs of sweating (wet spots visible, no droplets or streams)	2	No motility	2
Excessive sweating (streams or droplets)	3	Hypermotility or steel band	3
Total Composite Pain Score (Max Score = 60)			0–60
Total scoring duration = 5 min			

Components of the CPS:

The Composite Pain Scale comprehensively evaluates a horse's condition by considering multiple factors:

1. **Pain Face:** The pain faces include grimacing, muscle tightness around the eyes and nostrils. This is the area people find more difficult to observe and require some explanation, support and practice.
2. **Activity Levels:** This measure explores whether the horse is engaged or not with surroundings.
3. **Location in stable/paddock:** with others or alone, facing towards or away from doorways/gates etc (some variability with paddocked horses as the observer needs to make some adjustments)
4. **Posture:** How is the horse standing or shifting balance?
5. **Attention to area:** where is the horse's attention. Is he paying attention to the area of pain or not?
6. **Interaction:** Will the horse interact with the observer or not?
7. **Head position:** Head high, low or neutral?
8. **Response to food:** Is the horse interested in food offered or not?
9. **Breathing:** is the rate of breathing above 20 breaths per minute at rest?
10. **Heart rate:** is the heart rate above 40?

While other pain scales have their merits, the Composite Pain Scale is most practical for horse owners and stands out for its reliability and ease of application.

Every horse owner should be able to quickly and accurately assess their horse's pain levels to enable prompt intervention and care.