

Hey Neighbor

# For The Love Of Horses

By Frank J. Buchman

## Horses That Eat Barns Are Not Cribbing

Cribbing is an abnormal behavior affecting many horses.

In clarification and definition, Dr. Katherine Houpt, veterinarian and board certified animal behaviorist at Cornell University, emphasized "Cribbing is when a horse takes hold of an object with its front teeth, arches its neck, pulls and gulps in air, often making a sound. Horses who crib are very resistant to changing the habit.

"Chewing on wood and cribbing are not the same thing, even though horses that eat wood are often called cribbers. They are not; they're horses that chew and eat wood," Houpt added.

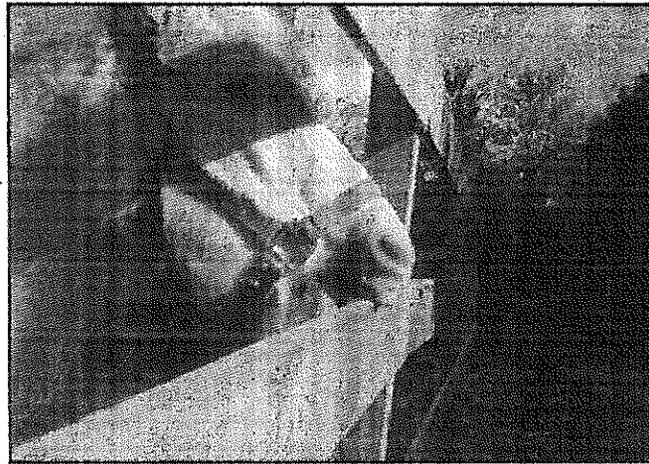
Horses can develop colic from cribbing, and they wear down their teeth, overdevelop neck muscles and sometimes lose weight. This is in addition to the damage horses can do to fences, barns, buckets and other objects they pull on.

What causes a horse to crib? "That's a very good question," Houpt responded. "It often starts when a foal is weaned and has a change of diet. Horses left on pastures are less likely to crib. Grains seem to be the culprit."

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While about 300,000 horses in this country are said to have the cribbing behavior, about 2.5 percent of all Thoroughbreds crib.

"There may be a gene linked with speed in race horses that causes cribbing, even though there are cribbing horses in so many other areas too," Houpt said. "Race horses, jumpers and dressage horses with a genetic predisposition to



A cribbing horse will grip an object with its incisors then arch its neck and pull back. The horse tenses up the muscles in its neck and face, retracts its voice box and gulps air into the esophagus.

chronic stress seem to be more inclined to crib than distance and endurance horses, although there are breed and use differences."

Additional proposed causes of cribbing include an equine version of obsessive-compulsive disorder such as constant hand washing in humans, the presence of ulcers and a desire to nibble.

While cribbing horses do take hold of wood, they actually seem to prefer metal.

"If it's electrified, they won't touch it though," he said.

What helps solve the problem most is not feeding sweet rations. "The best feed for horses that crib is hay and oats," Houpt said. "It's best to avoid molasses, corn and soybeans in rations for the lowest rate of cribbing."

Keeping horses in pasture helps reduce cribbing. Horses kept with other horses are less likely to crib, but the abnormal behavior will continue.

An anti-acid commercially available as Neighblox can be fed to horses to reduce the side effects of cribbing, according to Houpt. "Other medications are too expensive to be practical," she said.

Muzzles, neck straps and spiked or shock collars can be used on horses that crib to prevent them from arching their necks or from reaching a surface to grasp with their teeth.

"Shock collars work on some horses but send others into a frenzy, and it can be dangerous to the horse and the person trying to remove the collar," Houpt said.

"Mechanical devices can cause tissue damage and pain. They may also stress the horses and reduce feed consumption," Perkins re-

lated. However, if a cribbing horse has had colic more than once, the specialist recommended use of such procedures.

Providing a padded bar on which the horse can crib will reduce wear on its teeth and should direct its behavior away from buckets and fence rails.

"Another strategy is to give the horse a stall toy that it can roll over to obtain a small quantity of feed, but this does not reduce cribbing very much," according to Houpt.

"Surgical techniques, which have been used in the past, may have serious side effects and are ineffective over the long term. They are no longer recommended," Perkins said.

Further clarifying the problem of wood chewing horses, Houpt said, "They can literally eat the barn down and ingest the wood as they go."

This usually occurs in

cold weather, although wood chewing can happen at any time. "It is a behavior response to late winter," Houpt added. "A horse is like a deer in that he is a browser only at that time, and he'll look for shoots of young trees to eat in a pasture."

Wood chewing horses in confinement should be provided with another source of roughage or even provided with non-toxic tree branches to consume. "Horses fed pellet rations will often chew wood. "They need a variety of hay and straw bedding," Houpt said.

A feed additive called Quit is commercially available to help reduce wood chewing by horses.

Certain hardwoods can be used when building facilities so that horses won't eat it. Steel construction and metal covering on fences and walls stop destruction by horses that have a tendency to chew.

"It is certainly a behavior problem," said Dr. Gillian Perkins, also a veterinarian and internist at Cornell. "Nobody really knows exactly what causes a horse to crib, but the problem sometimes seems to be related to boredom. It doesn't have to be thought, and once a horse has started cribbing, it never really stops."

Certain breeds and specific lines of horses appear to be more prone to cribbing. "No one has found the specific gene related to cribbing, but the problem does often seem to be genet-

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