In the equine world, there are many different types of restraints horse handlers use to help control the horses. Restraints are important in that they help to have control over or to distract the horse so it is easier to examine them more closely, especially when they are not cooperating with us. Without twitches veterinarians would not normally be able to do closer examinations, such as ones involving rectal palpations or floating teeth, while still being safe from harm if something were to arise. Sometimes it is also necessary to twitch a horse for the Ferrier so they are able to trim or look at feet more closely, especially when the horse is feral or one who has not been handled as much.

Restraints and twitches are used in the equine world to help prevent handlers and surrounding individuals from getting hurt. They are also used as distractions while handlers or veterinarians are trying to examine something on their bodies, such as an injury. Halter, lead ropes and bridles are a few ways that can help to restrain horses. All of these help to play an important role in teaching horses that the handler is the one in charge and to a certain degree, they also help to restrain horses. Twitches are used to release endorphins into the bloodstream that help to “calm” the horse to a point where it is more tolerable to what is going on around him. Using twitching helps to relax horses and can sometimes cause them to change their behavior.

There are many types of restraints used by equestrians. The least invasive of all restraints would be using halters, lead rope, and bridles. Halters and lead ropes are used to lead horses from one place to another. After breaking a horse to know what handlers are ask of him while haltered, he will generally start to realize that if there is a halter on he cannot get away with whatever he pleases. If a horse rears up one is able to skank him with the lead rope to bring him back down to regain control. If a horse spooks or tries to get away, one must hold on to that rope with everything they have, because once he realizes he can’t get away he will understand that whatever he decided to spook about really wasn’t that big of a deal. He will learn to listen to the pressure that is being shown through that halter and what those pressures mean when they are applied. Bridles are very similar, but are considered to have more effect than a halter and lead, if they have a bit. Some bridles are worn with bits, not all of them, but depending on the type of bit some of them can be rough in the mouth of the horse. The amount of pressure applied through a bridle is all dependent on the size of the port, shank and the roughness/twist on the bit. The higher the port is the more pressure is applied on the upper palate and tongue. The shorter the port is the less amount of pressure is applied. If the bit has more twist to it, it also applies more pressure to the tongue.

Another way of using a noninvasive restraint would be to hold a horse’s foot up. This cannot be done with a horse who has never had their feet picked up before, that can cause the horse to freak out and could cause the handler and horse to get into a jam or to get hurt. But for horses that have had some experience with having their feet picked up, they know that they cannot physically walk on three legs. This type of restraint is used for a horse that is being fidgety or one who just doesn’t want to stand still long enough to get the job done. By picking up one of their front feet, they realize that they cannot move. Some will try to fight and get their foot back, but the handler cannot let them take their foot back. Once they realize they would be able to fight it and get their foot back, the horse will learn that if they always do that they can get their foot back on their terms. This is also used as a training mechanism for stubborn horses who want to be the one in charge because once they realize they aren’t going to get their foot back; they will become more submissive to the person handling their foot.
Lip chains and nose chains are two types of restraints that are used a lot on many hard to handle horses. There is a lot of controversy over using lip chains during horse shows. The lip chain just gives the handler an advantage while handling their horses. A lip chain is placed along the upper gum line in a horse’s mouth and attaches to the lead rope. While using a lip chain, keep a fair amount of pressure so that the chain does not slip off of the horses gums and into their mouths. According to Go Horse Show, the lip chain acts similarly to the twitch, when pressure is applied it releases endorphins into the bloodstream calming the animal. When the horse acts up simply apply more pressure to calm and regain control over your horse. Lip chains are used often for handling stallions, during breeding seasons, thoroughbred racehorses and for show horses. The stallions can tend to be aggressive and it gives the handlers an extra form of control while handling them. According to the AQHA they will not be allowing the use of lip chains during horse shows starting on January 1, 2016. This will mean more training will be necessary for all horses so they do not act up on their handlers, especially for those who are showing stallions. All horses can be unpredictable, but stallions are the most unpredictable because of testosterone in their system. If for chance there is a stallion that is showing during breeding season, he will definitely be more aggressive and will probably need a lip chain to have control over him.

Nose chains are similar to lip chains, although rather than being inside the mouth they go above the bridge of the nose. Like the nose piece of a halter they go over the nose and connect to the lead rope. They are often used on unruly or high strung horses. They bring the horse back down to reality when they are not paying attention or are being rude. It gives the handlers a little more stability while managing them. They work very similarly to the lip chain in that when pressure is applied through the lead rope the chain tightens on their nose and is a harsh, sharp feeling that releases endorphins. That sharp feeling brings their attention back to their handler and helps to calm them.
Neck, ear and lip twitches are also used to distract horses from what is going on in the environment around them. These types of twitches can all be done without a device. But for lip twitches most people have an actual twitch device. These devices are a wooden or plastic stick that has some form of a loop at the end, usually made with some sort of rope. The loop is what is used for the twitch. One holds the horse’s top lip and slide the loop over it. Once it is in place, twist the stick to tighten the loop around the lip. The tighter the twist, the more effect it has on distracting the horse. The twitch will then release endorphins into the bloodstream of the horse and cause the horse to relax. Although this does not always work for every horse, it generally will cause them to have a change in behavior and heart rate. Their heart rate will slow, so it is necessary to assess that before twitching a horse. They also sometimes cause the horse to drop its head and make their eyes droopy. To do an ear or neck twitch one simply just pinches their ear or skin and fold it over to get them to focus on that feeling rather than what is happening around them.

Lastly there are chemical restraints. These tend to be used for serious injury assessment and floating horse teeth. The horses don’t enjoy having their teeth filed down; that is why we sedate them to keep them from being more of a nuisance. Other times if there is a serious injury and the horse will be in too much pain to have the injury looked at, sedation is used as well. Like for instance, a horse steps on a nail. The veterinarian might choose to sedate the horse to remove the nail and to figure out how far into the hoof wall that nail had entered. This would cause pain and discomfort to the animal from messing around with its wound while trying to decipher the extent of the injury. The last thing an owner wants to do is to cause more pain and discomfort for their animal, therefore they may opt for the chemical sedative to reduce the amount of pain.

Lip and nose chains need to be allowed because they are good to use in the show ring. They help to protect not only the handler but the other contestants, the judges and also the individuals working in the pens. They help to release endorphins into the bloodstream to calm down and also to help gain more control over the horse. Twitches like the nose twitch, should also be allowed to use in the horse industry because they are also another noninvasive way to relax and calm a fidgety horse. Chemical restraint is also another great way to help calm a horse, although it is more expensive and requires injecting drugs into the body; it is necessary use for veterinarians to get important checkups done.
AnSci 415

Restraints Used on Horses

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