

**Lilydale Clinic**

484 Maroondah Highway
Lilydale VIC 3140
P (03) 9739 5244 F (03) 9735 5509

Yarra Glen Clinic

28 Bell Street Yarra Glen VIC 3775
P (03) 9730 1569

www.yarrarangesvet.com.au
clinic@yarrarangesvet.com.au

Headshaking

Headshaking is a serious and distressing neurological condition of horses. The exact underlying cause is still not fully known, but there are several known triggers. Some horses are so badly affected by this condition that they can injure themselves or their riders in attempts to relieve their pain and discomfort.

Signs of headshaking syndrome include:

- Facial or nasal discomfort, rubbing on the front leg repeatedly
- Rotation or sideways shaking of the head that is worse when being ridden
- Changes in head carriage
- Avoidance of nasal contact or clamping of the nostrils with a watery nasal discharge
- Rearing and refusing to move forwards
- Striking at the face

These signs can also be caused by many other conditions so it is important to have a vet visit with a full examination and tests to rule out other more readily treatable conditions such as eye and ear problems, dental disease, muscular pain, respiratory problems and other injuries or behavioural problems.

If there is no other underlying cause identified, then a diagnosis of headshaking syndrome is made by exclusion. This condition is similar to a condition in people known as Trigeminal Neuralgia, which is characterised by excruciating facial pain. We think that in horses the sensation is like having a shock from an electric fence inside the nose.

Head shaking can be either seasonal (occurring only at certain times of the year) or non seasonal (occurring year round) and can vary in severity from mild through to severe, where the horse is dangerous to be around and a danger to itself (Grade 1 – 5). Horses with a Grade 3 or greater diagnosis should not be ridden.

Treatment depends on identifying trigger factors such as light or seasonal allergies and using masks and nose nets to prevent these trigger factors from reaching the horse, plus medication with a variety of antihistamines and human medications such as carbamazepine. There may be a little trial and error in determining what medication and management plan works best for your horse depending on what trigger factors are identified. A diary recording when the symptoms occur and when they are worst may help as well.

If you suspect your horse is showing signs of head shaking syndrome then it is important to have a vet assessment in order to rule out other problems and then discuss ongoing management and treatment.