

What does “wellness” mean?

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What does the word “wellness” mean to you? We hear it a lot these days, in various arenas of health care: wellness exams, wellness programs, wellness centers. To many, in both the veterinary and the human medical communities, it seems to mean annual check-ups, looking for early signs of disease. While that’s a commendable goal—catch it before it’s too late—we can be doing much more to ensure our horse’s health and well-being beyond being vigilant for early signs of disease.

To me, wellness is more than just the absence of disease. To be in good health, or truly *well*, is to have a sense of *vitality* of body, mind, and spirit; a vibrancy that is difficult to put into words, but unmistakable when you see it. To be in good health is also to have a *resilience* to illness and injury; a robust constitution which resists disease and rapidly restores health and function if illness or injury does happen to overwhelm the body’s resources.

So, what does it take to ensure that our horses truly are well? In the last two issues I discussed the horse’s natural diet as one of the foundations for good health. Over the next several months we’ll discuss other specific aspects of equine health. For now, I want to go back to fundamentals and examine how the horse is naturally designed to live and function, because therein lie the keys to keeping our horses healthy.

Three Fundamental Facts

There are three fundamental facts to bear in mind regarding horses and horsekeeping—facts which we ignore at the risk of adversely affecting our horses’ health, well-being, performance, and even longevity (certainly career longevity, and possibly lifespan, too).

1. Horses are social animals.

In the wild, horses live in close-knit herds or bands, and they form long-lasting social relationships which are important for each member’s survival and well-being. They are highly interactive, regularly enjoying mutual grooming, fly swatting, play, and just hanging out together. So, in other words, horses are meant to live together, in intimate association with one another.

In contrast, many domesticated horses are kept physically isolated from one another and, even though they may be able to see other horses nearby, they’re given little or no opportunity to interact, for fear that they might hurt themselves or each other. Furthermore, most horses are bought, sold, and otherwise shuffled around from barn to barn throughout their lives without any consideration for the social bonds they may have formed with other horses. For some horses, being uprooted in this way is just as stressful as being weaned as a foal, and it may be repeated several times during the course of that horse’s life.

2. Horses are grazing animals.

There are several aspects to this fundamental makeup that are important:

- The horse's digestive system is designed for fairly continuous intake of high-fiber, low-carbohydrate, low-fat, living plant material (leaves, stems, flowers, seeds/fruit, bark, and roots) that is obtained by foraging for most of the day and night.
- The horse's metabolism is designed to be effectively fueled by the digestion and assimilation of this high-fiber, low-carbohydrate, low-fat, phytonutrient-diverse diet.
- Horses are designed to move around for much of the day and night, foraging.
- Slow, low-impact movement (walking, some trotting) predominates, with periods of rest and short bursts of athletic activity interspersed throughout the day and night.
- Horses are designed to eat with their heads down (i.e. to eat at or near ground level, except when browsing taller bushes and trees).
- Horses are designed to move from one grazing area to the next, and they avoid grazing near their manure.
- Horses are designed to tolerate all sorts of weather conditions and seasonal variations, adjusting their body fat reserves and hair coat accordingly.

That's a far cry from the way most domestic horses are fed, housed, and exercised! In fact, I believe that this disparity explains a whole host of physical and behavioral problems we consider "par for the course" with horses, including colic, respiratory diseases, exercise-related muscle disorders ("tying up"), laminitis, degenerative joint disease, tendon and ligament injuries, other orthopedic problems, "stable vices," and other undesirable behaviors, to name just the most common ones.

3. Horses are a prey species.

Historically, horses were hunted, killed, and eaten by predators (large carnivores and even humans). In fact, in parts of the US where bears and mountain lions are still prevalent, horses must remain on guard against these predators. As part of their protective mechanism, horses have a very broad range of vision (almost 360 degrees around), very good hearing, a very good sense of smell, and very fast reflexes. They are sensitive to sudden movements and sounds, even at a distance.

In the wild, their very survival depends on them being highly sensitive to each other and to what's going on around them. Those natural and appropriate instincts have not been lost in domesticated horses, no matter how much we may try to train them out of our horses. When we manage horses in what, for them, is an unnatural way, primarily to suit ourselves (whether for convenience, pleasure, comfort, economy, ego gratification, or tradition), this natural way of being can set a horse up for chronic stress or *dis-ease* which, sooner or later, manifests physically as what we recognize as disease.

Many horses seem to cope well enough with typical domestic conditions: confined to a stall or small paddock, fed an unnatural diet, allowed limited grazing and limited opportunity to develop normal social relationships with other horses, etc. However, a closer look indicates that keeping horses this way has subtle yet far-reaching effects on their health, well-being, performance, and even their longevity. For example, gastric ulcer disease is very common in performance horses, even though the horse may show few

obvious signs that he has stomach ulcers. And we just assume that arthritis, other chronic degenerative diseases, and eventually organ failure are an inevitable part of growing old, when in fact they are largely preventable. These conditions represent a lifetime of tiny insults and cumulative damage to a system that is designed to be self-repairing, but which has its limits.

The key, then, to keeping our horses healthy for life is to *adequately address the horse's basic needs*. Base your health and management decisions around the horse's nature and natural lifestyle, and you won't go far wrong.

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