

Robert McDowell's Herbal Treatments

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Herbs for the Nervous Horse:

These days, a large number of performance horses are highly strung to the point where it impedes their performance, and, in some cases, make the animal dangerous. Many riders and trainers have resorted to the use of chemical sedatives and tranquilizers to calm their horses, but not only are these products often illegal to use in competitive situations, they can damage the horse's overall health and well-being.

Judiciously used herbs are a far better alternative for treating the nervous horse, as they often effect a permanent change in temperament, and are 'legal' for competition.

Herbs nourish, strengthen and re-balance the nervous system so that once an anxious horse calms down he no longer reacts to things around him. The actions of sedatives and tranquilizers on the horse's nervous system are completely different, as they simply block nervous system responses for as long as the drug remains in the horse's system. This is why they are a "one-time fix" instead of an overall cure. In a nervous horse, a tranquilizer will dull his reactions and make him physically unable to jump around. The right herb will mean the nervous horse will no longer want to jump around.

In dealing with nervous disorders, there are no 'magic' quick fixes. In treating a horse that has a nervous temperament, it's very important to look at the horse's whole history - both health and past experiences such as training, traumas, etc. This gives us the information to combine herbs and other treatments such as homeopathy, nutrition, and perhaps even a change in training regime or routine - to bring the horse's whole metabolism back into balance.

Treating the whole horse rather than a specific nervous disorder is important because there is a very close relationship between how a nervous system reacts and responds, and how the horse's whole metabolism functions.

For example, an imbalance or nervous system disorder can affect the horse's digestive efficiency, thyroid balance, liver function, spleen function, respiratory efficiency, blood quality, and immunity to infection. These aspects of the horse's metabolism must all be brought into balance in order for a treatment of serious nervous system problems to be truly effective and long lasting. This is where the advice of a professional herbalist is invaluable in prescribing a comprehensive treatment for each individual case.

Nervines

It is not advisable to attempt to treat a horse with a severe problem without professional advice, but if a horse's nervousness is due to a slight imbalance, feeding him a mix of herbs will usually effect a long-term solution.

There is a class of herbs called 'nervines' - herbs that have specific actions on the nervous system. Many of the nervines contain high levels of magnesium phosphate - a mineral that has been found to be very important to the health and well being of nerves. Different nervines nourish different aspects of the nervous system; the job of the herbalist is to identify the nervine(s) that will suit a particular sort of nervous system.

There are around a dozen nervines that apply to humans, but there are four main nervines - Valerian, Vervain, Chamomile, and Hops - that apply to horses. A horse will not always fit exactly into just one nervous system type - he will often show the major signs of one type, and some signs of one or more of the other types. The first step in finding the right herbs to treat your horse's nervous disorder is to identify his nervous "types".

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The Types

The **VALERIAN** horse typically holds all his anxiety and tension in his muscles - you'll find his muscles will always be a little taut. When frightened, this horse will literally become rigid with fear, with the muscles all rock-hard. He's the horse in the western trail event that appears on the surface to be managing the obstacles, but his teeth are grinding and the rider can feel the rigid tension beneath the saddle. He's the kind of horse you often see at shows, where he makes it (albeit somewhat stiffly!) around the dressage arena accompanied by the sound of teeth gnashing on the bit. While the Valerian horse typically freezes up with his tension, rather than bolting, if he encounters a series of stressful events, he may just explode bucking, rearing or taking off.

The herb Valerian is popularly used to help people with sleeping problems, and the application to horses is similar. Even in relatively low-stress situations, the Valerian type of horse has a hard time truly relaxing his muscles - in its application to the nervous horse, Valerian relaxes and re-balances the nervous system so he's able to relax muscular tension.

The **VERVAIN** horse's anxiety is processed through the skin. He is very sensitive and twitchy on the skin and is generally very nervous and jumpy, without necessarily being afraid, upset or angry. This is the horse that is constantly agitated and highly reactive, always moving and fidgeting. Sometimes it seems it is almost impossible to make this horse stand still, and he is the equine equivalent of a person who constantly taps a foot or chews on their fingernails.

Training methods that rely on repetitive exposure to frightening situations to reduce the "spook" in a horse will often backfire with a horse of this temperament. This type is very common among horses who have raced or those of race breeding, as the successful fast runner has been bred to have excess energy that often presents as this fidgety temperament. The Vervain horse is also more likely to become a crib-biter, weaver or wind-sucker when kept in a confined space for lengthy periods, as developing these vices provides an outlet for his excess energy.

Giving this horse the herb Vervain re-balances his nervous system so than he stops the endless fidgeting, moving and jumpiness. This horse will always be sensitive, yet once his nervous system health returns, he will be able to slow down and concentrate - making him more trainable and therefore more reliable under pressure.

The **CHAMOMILE** horse's anxiety is processed through his digestive system. He gets upset easily, almost always presenting with diarrhea or scours when he's nervous or worried. He may show some signs of external stress (like the other nervine types above), but he mainly internalizes his worry, so while he may be a little "spooky" - the Chamomile horse's main problems are in the gut. The Chamomile horse may even suffer an attack of colic when under stress, and he is the one that rapidly loses weight and coat condition in stressful situations and is slow to "back-up" as a race horse.

Treating the Chamomile nervous system type horse with this herb Chamomile not only re-balances the nervous system, but also helps to maintain the health of the horse's digestive system.

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The **HOPS** horse processes his anxiety through his head. He is easily distracted mentally, and it's very difficult for him to concentrate as he's constantly very scattered and unfocused. These horses are the "dizzy-lizzies" of the horse world. He is usually very "busy" in the head, although not necessarily physically 'hot' to handle and ride. He will be difficult to train in the sense that he will not retain things well. With the Hops horse, you will find yourself going over the same issues again and again, and his concentration span often seems to be less than 30 seconds.

Giving him the herb Hops allows him to calm down mentally, and to become focused. In this balanced state, the Hops horse will be able to concentrate on the job at hand, and given the right direction he can shine in his chosen field.

PASSION FLOWER is another herb that has proved to be very effective in treating long-standing nervous habits, but it is usually administered in conjunction with other nervines. Passion Flower helps to relax the nervous system, and works particularly well (almost as a "catalyst") in conjunction with one or more of the preceding herbs to facilitate the effect of the "primary herbs".

There is not really a "Passion Flower" type, but the herb helps as a facilitator that helps the horse to set aside previously entrenched reaction patterns and adopt newer more comfortable patterns. Passion Flower would be appropriate for the ex-race horse type, or indeed any horse that has a long history of nervous or "temperament" problems - the persistently "spooky" horse; the long-time buckler/rearer/bolter, for example.

Passion Flower's chief asset is that it assists in the breaking of nervous system habit patterns as opposed to normalizing a particular nervous system type. It is almost always used in conjunction with the dominant nervine.

HYPERICUM or St. Johns Wort is another Nervine, which has some application as a nervous system type but is best used in support of specific treatments, externally and in small and regulated doses internally. The actions of Hypericum are described more fully in the *Materia Medica* toward the end of the book.

Once a horse's nervous system type (or in some cases types) is identified - giving him the corresponding herb or combination of herbs will usually correct the imbalance and end the nervous behavior. Treatment with the appropriate herb or herbs needs to take place daily for around three months. While a really obvious change in behavior usually occurs in the first month, if the proper herbs are used for the full course of treatment, a permanent change can occur.

The herbs allow the horse to relax, and remove the need for nervous reactions. This re-educates the nervous system as it settles into new habits, so that the horse no longer reacts in the old way. Sometimes, after a year or so following a treatment course, a horse may revert to old behavior patterns as a result of his nervous system becoming unbalanced. Perhaps due to stress resulting from a change in his physical environment (a new owner/home), strenuous performance demands, an accident, surgery, or feeding/medication with chemicals - and almost always a month or so follow-up with his particular 'mix' will correct the problem.

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Sometimes, however, you will find a horse that needs to be given his particular herbs indefinitely, but this horse is the exception. These horses may have long, ingrained behavior patterns, a history of abuse, or other metabolic problems that continue to upset the balance of the nervous system. These are cases to be dealt with by professional herbalists.

Also, if a horse's nervous system is seriously out of balance, there will be physiological implications - such as inefficient digestion or absorption; inability to hold condition; hormonal imbalances; and structural weakness - all of which must be addressed in conjunction with the nervous system by a professional in order to effect a complete return to normal.

My standard Nervous System Rehabilitation formula is the place I normally start when first approached by an owner of a horse whose performance or health is clearly being affected by nerves. After an initial course of the standard mix I normally seek feedback so that subsequent courses may be adapted according to the specific response. The standard mix can be ordered online and will be dispatched the same day normally.

Robert McDowell
Herbalist
September 2001