

Title: Enrichment– How to your horse happy during box rest

Vets often ask owners to rest their horse, pony or donkey to allow healing to occur. This can be after surgery, joint injections or to help manage lameness, weight loss and laminitis.

The idea of imposing box rest on a horse tends to worry owners who feel that their horse will be bored, frustrated and miserable during this time.

Our role as our horse's carer is to make this experience as positive as possible, and to think of it more as a "spa break" than a stretch in prison.

We all know that horses need Friends, Forage and Freedom so starting with those how can we make the spa break great?

Friends-

If possible keep a companion next to your horse, it doesn't matter if you change the friends and have different ones in, the aim is not to make your horse feel lonely. As horses are herd animals, being alone is a frightening experience. In some cases non horse friends are great- sheep, goats, chickens, just other



Mirrors can be good "fake friends", stable mirrors have been shown to reduce anxiety in stabled horses-they can see another horse and feel less alone. Stable mirrors should be made of polished acrylic (never glass) and are relatively cheap to buy and install.

Music is a great way of soothing your horse, and studies by Hartpury college showed that playing classical music or country and western was more relaxing to horses than silence. Rock and Jazz music were found to cause anxiety and nervous bouts of eating along with head tossing and snorting. The music should be kept at a low level to achieve the relaxing effect.



Grooming, scratching and massaging your horse mimic the natural interactions they would have with friends, so use the time that you would have been riding to learn simple massage techniques and try them on your horse. They will feel happier and their muscles less stiff from lack of movement.

Forage-

In natural systems horses eat up to 18 hours a day, and find great comfort in exploring for food and eating it. Much as we enjoy cooking, eating out or just chewing gum, the time spent involved in food related activity is pleasurable and distracting for horses. However we know that unlimited high calorie food will make your horse gain weight so think outside the box here.



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Horses need approximately 2% of their body weight as dry matter to maintain weight and 1.5% to start to lose weight. Donkeys and native ponies need less than this as they are so efficient at metabolising food.

If this food is provided twice a day and eaten in a couple of hours the horse will be unsatisfied, and develop an acidic stomach and gastric ulcers as well as the original problem.

So we need to find ways to spread out feeding- there are just so many choices out there it can be overwhelming- here are some examples.

Haynets with fine holes, slow feeder devices, spreading the feed into several locations, mixing hay with straw to allow for a longer chewing time. Feeding low energy low sugar chaffs that take time to chew well.

Treats can be hidden in horse balls and toys, or simply in cardboard boxes.

Carrots, apples and root vegetables hung on string make great food related toys and require hours to demolish.

Logs from non toxic trees can be provided, chewing and stripping the bark provides great enrichment for your horses. Safe logs include apple, beech, ash and birch.

Freedom-

During your horse's spa break they may not be able to roam outside but you can bring the outside to them, and offer them *freedom of choice*.

Simple ways use scents and tastes to change the environment and provide stimulation or relaxation. Lavender oil scent diffusers have a calming effect according to researchers at the University of Arizona, while other groups have found that horses enjoy mint, banana, fenugreek and cherry flavours. The flavours or herbs can be sprinkled on feed, used to enliven water buckets or even just eaten whole.



Soft branches and wild plants from the hedgerows and banks are interesting and can be hung in bunches in the stable, or spread on the floor to be found.

Scratching posts and brushes allow horses to enjoy the sensation of a good scratch and alleviate boredom.

Snuffle mats are another brilliant way of providing lots of choice over smells and tastes.

For those of you who are really ambitious this time could even be spent teaching your horse to be clicker trained or to learn simple tricks. One of our vets Jo Cook has taught a horse to "count" and demonstrated this trick to none other than David Attenborough!

Hopefully this piece will have given you some inspiration to turn your horse's stable into an interesting restful haven.

If you are still experiencing difficulties resting your horse please don't hesitate to contact one of the team