

An Abnormal Behavior in A Horse
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Jeremy's beloved quarter horse, Sally, has been acting strange for the last several months. She stands in her stall, grabbing the rail at her hay basket, mouthing it and gulping in air. This bizarre behavior is known as cribbing and Sally will do it for minutes at a time, sometimes for as long as two or three hours a day.

Behaviors such as Sally's cribbing are known as stereotypies because they are repetitive, happen the same way each time and appear to have no function. Many animal behaviorists think such abnormal behavior is an indicator of illness or of stresses on the animal. Stereotypies are not unique to horses but are seen in a variety of domestic animals from dogs to cats to birds to pigs and cattle, as well as wild animals kept in captivity such as zoo animals. Dogs that chase their tails until they damage them or polar bears that pace their enclosures until their feet are injured are examples of other stereotypies.

Some stereotypies can have medical causes and animals showing them should always be examined by a veterinarian. The behavioral causes of stereotypies are poorly understood. They are frequently seen in animals that are socially isolated or kept in small areas, or prevented from engaging in normal activities or normal feeding opportunities. They may result from frustrations of normal behavior such as stallions housed near mares but not allowed to breed them. Sally's problems began soon after Jeremy moved her from a pasture where she was with other horses to a small stall where she was kept by herself. Many times making changes in the animal's environment can help stop stereotypies. Putting social animals with others, putting animals in larger and more stimulating places or changing the feeding routine can often help. Sally's problem stopped when she was put back at pasture. Sometimes it isn't possible to make changes to the environment to treat stereotypies. In these situations, behavior modification and/or drugs prescribed by a veterinarian may be helpful. Blocking the occurrence of the behavior with straps, harnesses, collars or surgery should only be used as a last resort after all other options have been exhausted. Once established, stereotypies can be difficult to correct, so as with other behavior problems, early diagnosis and treatment are important.