

"JUST TRANQUILIZE HIM...."

Your horse is a full of energy, and you want to ride him, or, your horse won't stand still for the clippers and you need to clip him, or, worst of all, you need to get your horse on a trailer and he won't load. Why don't you "just 'tranquelize him?" After all, it's just a little 'Ace'. Here are a few things you need to know BEFORE you take that next step.

Unfortunately, tranquilizing a horse has become such a common scenario that most owners wouldn't think twice about doing it. The fact is, that anytime you introduce a drug, of any kind, into the horse there is always some physiological response, even though it is often so small as to not be clinically obvious. The amazing thing about tranquilizers such as 'Ace' is that it takes just the tiniest amount to evoke a big response in your horse. When all the additives and liquids in the injectable tranquilizer are removed, what is left is such a small amount of the *pure* chemical substance that it would cover the head of a pin! Additionally, this chemical is further diluted by the liquids and tissues of your horse's body. And still this tiny amount of tranquilizing drug has enough of an effect to slow down and quiet a wild 1300 pound animal!

When tranquilizing drugs contact the susceptible receptors in your horse's cells, many physiological responses begin to occur throughout your horse's body. Here are a few of the more common responses.

1. respiratory rate slows
2. volume of air inhaled with each breath necessarily increases
3. awareness is dulled and balance is often affected
4. blood pressure drops
5. heart rate changes
6. body temperature moves toward current environmental temperature
7. motor activity is inhibited, muscle response time is decreased
8. male relaxation of penile retractor muscles (rarely permanent)
9. female suppression of ovulation and estrous cycle
10. and, it is unclear precisely how long it takes for every trace of the chemical to be fully eliminated from your horse's body. According to an article published in Equus magazine, "... detection of the tranquilizer may be possible by current tests for up to four days following a single injection"

So, when *should* you tranquilize your horse?

While there are many reasons to carefully consider not tranquilizing your horse, it does not mean that your choice to **NOT** to tranquilize your horse is necessarily the right one. Sometimes it is better to choose to tranquilize your horse than not to. Here are several instances where tranquilizing may be the right choice.

Tranquilizers are often used by veterinarians to quiet a horse when performing veterinary care. This is sometimes done for the horse's safety and comfort (and sometimes for the vet's as well!). And occasionally tranquilizers are included in veterinary treatment *specifically* for their physiological effects on the horse's body. Since horses can become frightened or stressed, tranquilizing them can make an unpleasant, fearful experience less stressful, and therefore a better alternative to not tranquilizing them. Stressed horses can also present a danger to the humans around them, and we know stress can be a contributing factor to some equine health-related problems such as colic.

When considering tranquilizing your horse, one guide to help you calculate the risks against the benefits is to ask yourself, "am I doing this for the good of the horse?" I see too many horse owners resorting to tranquilizing their horses for everything from riding, handling, clipping, trailer loading, shoeing (though sometimes necessary when a physical issue is involved), braiding, and even showing.

If you are using a tranquilizer *only* for behavior modification, perhaps you need to ask yourself a different question. Not "should I *tranquilize* my horse to 'improve' his behavior" but "how can I *RETRAIN* my horse to 'improve' his behavior?" Conceivably you should focus on **teaching your horse** to be calm and untroubled under tack, stand quietly for the clippers, and load easily on to the trailer. Owners have a responsibility to teach their horses to be calm and assured in their surroundings. Remember, while most of our horses were not born in the wild, we are still dealing with animals whose natural environment allows them to rely on their instinct for survival. It is far superior horsemanship to change our horse's undesirable behavior through straight-forward training than it is to "just tranquilize him", but that's another article.

Until next time,

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