

STALLION MASTURBATION

Stallion masturbation is considered normal, healthy behavior, and the use of an anti-masturbation device to inhibit a stallion from normal spontaneous erection and masturbation does not decrease the behavior, but rather adversely affects normal sexual behavior

By Aleta Walther

Sue M. McDonnell, PhD, is an equine behaviorist on a mission -- to inform and educate horse owners and handlers that stallion masturbation is normal, healthy behavior and that trying to discourage such behavior is likely to do more harm than good. McDonnell holds a PhD in reproductive physiology and behavior, and she is the director of the Reproductive Behavior Program at the University of Pennsylvania's New Bolton Center. McDonnell and her research team have conducted several studies pertaining to masturbation in equids, and after years of research and investigation, McDonnell concluded that stallion masturbation is normal, healthy behavior in equids -- and perhaps even necessary for healthy sexual function.

"It has been our observation that if you try to stop this behavior, it is very unlikely that you will stop the target behavior you are punishing," said McDonnell. "I certainly recommend people not try to stop stallions from masturbating."

Masturbation in horses, ponies, donkeys, zebras, etc. involves extension of the penis and rhythmic bouncing, pressing, or sliding of the erect penis against the belly. Some stallions might even include pelvic thrusts. Although the penis enlarges as in copulation, and some pre-sperm fluid might drip from the urethra, masturbation rarely results in ejaculation.

Before we go any further, it should be pointed out that stallions experience two types of erections -- sexual and spontaneous. Each has its own distinct behavior. Sexual erections are those occurrences in which a stallion is aroused for breeding purposes. A stallion that is sexually aroused is excited and aggressive. Spontaneous erections, or masturbation, appear to occur at regular intervals, without any external stimulus, usually when the horse is very relaxed and in a solitary, rather than heterosexual, context.

"During the past decade, spontaneous erection and masturbation has been found to be normal, natural behavior not only in equids, but in all mammalian species, including man," McDonnell said. "In horses, however, masturbation is often mistaken as a vice by horse owners, trainers, and veterinarians."

Accordingly, there are a number of different devices available commercially which are specifically designed to deter erections and penile movement in horses. These devices include stallion rings, brushes, cages, and shock devices.

"Using these devices is a mild form of adverse conditioning, but I have found that in most cases, using these devices actually increased masturbation," McDonnell said. "We now know that you have to be pretty aggressive, almost to the point of injuring the penis, before you can have any hope of stopping the behavior."

In addition to these more long-term management measures, masturbating stallions have been known to have had their penises subjected to pokes, jabs, slaps, and whipping from handlers wielding pitch forks, rakes, lead shanks, or whips. Clinically, McDonnell has noted an increase recently in the number of animals suffering injury or damage from devices or practices used to deter masturbation.

Until just recently, McDonnell recorded only a few cases each year where an injury to the penis, or a serious libido problem, was associated with trying to deter masturbation. This year, however, more than 40 cases have been brought to her attention. She believes it might be the result of a shock device recently introduced to deter equine vices, including masturbation. She believes the national advertising, which touted masturbation as a vice, moved the issue of stallion masturbation into greater consciousness.

“Sadly, some reproduction physiologists, some horseman, even some veterinarians and textbooks still view masturbation as abnormal behavior,” she said. “We have known for 10 years that masturbation in horses is completely normal behavior, yet myths still exist. We apparently haven’t gotten the message out.”

Myth #1: Masturbation affects a horse’s libido and wastes sexual energy.

Myth #2: Masturbation depletes the sperm count.

McDonnell’s studies have shown that there is no relationship between libido and masturbation. All equids at all levels of libido and fertility experience masturbation, but ejaculation is so rare that there is no theoretical reason that it would affect fertility. Throughout her career, McDonnell has studied about 10,000 episodes of masturbation and has observed only 18 cases where a stallion ejaculated. Six of the episodes occurred either before the stallion achieved erection and penile movement, or after the erection subsided.

McDonnell has also concluded that most stallions masturbate at regular intervals, about every 90 minutes if undisturbed. Masturbation, however, does not consume a stallion’s attention or energy to the exclusion of other normal behavior. During spontaneous erection and masturbation, equids simultaneously engage in other normal activities, including standing quietly, feeding, drinking, and walking. She also found that the frequency of masturbation is not less than that of many other behaviors -- lying down, drinking, eating hay, and rolling. Spontaneous erection and masturbation, however, did not occur during vigilant states and were reliably interrupted by disturbances in the stable.

“We know of no case in which masturbation has resulted in injury or interfered with the general health of a horse,” McDonnell said. “But I have seen cases where stallions have been over-disciplined for displaying sexual interest in mares at inappropriate times, or masturbating during their performance careers, and subsequently experienced serious difficulty when they retired to breeding.”

Myth #3: A stallion masturbates because it is bored.

Not so, according to McDonnell, who claimed that masturbation is not an aberrant behavior like vices such as pacing, weaving, cribbing, or digging, although many horse owners seem to think so. With other vices, horses often exhibit anxious behavior, whereas stallions appear calm and relaxed while masturbating. In her studies, she found that even wild horses and zebras, which roam freely, would masturbate on a regular basis.

“We have observed: zebras in the wild, zebras in zoos; donkeys in the wild; horses in stalls, horses in pastures; animals for breeding, animals which are not bred; stallions which can see females, and stallions which cannot; bachelor stallions, and harem stallions out in the wild; and they all masturbate about every 90 minutes,” McDonnell said. “In fact, wild horses are much more regular, probably because they are not affected by all the distractions of captivity.”

In one particular instance, McDonnell observed a pasture-breeding stallion masturbate about 10 times a day while in the company of 15 aggressively estrous mares. It seemed unlikely that he masturbated out of boredom.

Myth #4: A stallion masturbates to vent sexual frustration of hyper sexuality.

McDonnell has gotten a tremendous number of calls from horse owners and stallion managers complaining that a stallion appears hypersexual -- stating that even though a stallion has covered several mares in a day, he still masturbates. On the other hand, she also gets calls from horse owners saying their non-breeding stallion or gelding masturbates frequently and thus deduced that the animal was sexually frustrated because it was not allowed to breed. She also has received calls from owners and stallion managers who complain that although a breeding stallion appeared to have a low libido, or lack of interest in the breeding shed, he still masturbated. Some concluded (incorrectly) that the masturbation was robbing the stallion of its sex drive.

“It is tempting to associate the masturbation with lack of breeding success,” McDonnell said. “Still, I am certain that masturbation is not the root of the problem in those types of cases.”

McDonnell also has gotten calls from horse owners who are concerned because their six-month-old foal or 29-year-old horse was masturbating.

“I tell them they should be happy that their horse exhibits this behavior,” she said. “It’s as normal as a horse dropping his penis to urinate. Although it is normal equid behavior to masturbate, some people still try to thwart the behavior.”

Unfortunately, many stallions still pay for these antiquated attitudes. McDonnell has attended horses whose handlers claimed their stallion was not performing in the breeding shed and they suspected the animal had a sexual dysfunction. However, during examination, McDonnell uncovered incidences where a stallion ring had cut so severely in the penis that scar tissue had formed a natural stallion ring. Even though the actual stallion ring had been removed, the scar tissue caused enough pain upon erection that it distracted the horse from performing. She also has treated horses that have suffered penile abrasions from wire brushes and lacerations of the glands caused by cages.

“There are some people, particularly race trackers, and cultures in other parts of the world, who still believe masturbation is a waste of energy,” McDonnell explained. “At racetracks in South America, all stallions are fitted with anti-masturbation devices when they arrive at the track, and they stay with them throughout their racing career.”

Although gelding a stallion does lower the horse’s libido, geldings will still masturbate, according to McDonnell. She has found that geldings masturbate about half as frequently, or about every three hours when conditions allow, and episodes last only about half the duration. Masturbation is much less conspicuous in geldings because the penis is often smaller, having never developed to full adult size because of the gelding process.

After years of research and investigation, McDonnell is adamant and confident in stating that aversive conditioning has no effect on spontaneous erection and masturbation. Amy Hinze, a research student at New Bolton Center, recently confirmed her findings.

Just this summer, Hinze conducted a formal study where she found that attempting to stop masturbation had an adverse effect on libido and sexual performance in breeding stallions. In the Hinze study, erection, ejaculation, mount readiness, and number of mounts to ejaculation all were affected following aversive conditioning of spontaneous erection and masturbation. She also found that erection rigidity score, number of ejaculatory pulses, and number of vocalizations decreased.

“These results confirm that the use of an anti-masturbation device to inhibit a stallion from normal spontaneous erection and masturbation does not decrease the behavior, but rather adversely affects normal sexual behavior,” the Hinze study stated.

Okay, so its normal and healthy for horses to masturbate, but what do you do when your show horse begins to masturbate at an embarrassing or inappropriate time -- like standing in a halter class in front of 500 spectators. “The key to interrupting this behavior is distraction,” McDonnell said. “Tickle the horse under the elbow or move it forward a step or two -- any change in posture that you can evoke will usually cause a horse to pull up. You don’t have to whack it on the belly or do anything that is obviously aggressive. Because horses masturbate in a relaxed state, all you usually have to do is wake them up.”