

## Photic headshaking

Headshaking is at best an annoying and frustrating behavior, and in severe cases can be so frequent and violent that it interferes with the horse's comfort and its ability to perform. Headshaking under saddle can be caused by many different reasons, and is rarely due to bad behaviour alone. Often the horse is suffering from discomfort or pain, such as sharp teeth, poor saddle fit or back pain. Horses that also headshake at rest may have an underlying ear or eye condition, or may suffer from the often undiagnosed condition known as photic headshaking.

### WHAT IS PHOTIC HEADSHAKING AND WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

Photic head shakers suffer from sensitivity to strong sunlight, and as such, the most common onset of signs is in spring or early summer. As the name suggests, these horses toss their head, usually up and down, acting like a fly has gone up their nose, often with snorting and aggressive rubbing of their nose. These symptoms are usually exacerbated when the horse is worked or exposed to direct sunlight.

### WHAT CAUSES PHOTIC HEADSHAKING?

In these horses with sunlight sensitivity, it is thought that exposure to bright light causes a nerve in the head to send a tingling or painful sensation to the horse's muzzle area. The horse reacts to this sensation by headshaking. The pain felt by the horse is referred to as neuropathic pain, and may be persistent or intermittent. This is a similar mechanism to that which occurs in humans who experience sneezing in sunlight.

### TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR PHOTIC HEADSHAKING



There are some simple management changes that can be made to help horses suffering from this problem;

- UV-blocking or netting fly masks (including nose cover) during the day
- Avoid bright sunlight.
- Work the horse during the early morning or late evening.
- Stable the horse during the day, with nightly turnout.

Horses with photic headshaking benefit from muzzle protection to minimize direct sunlight. Specific antihistamine medication is also available, with studies showing up to 75% improvement in signs. It should be remembered that photic headshaking is only one cause of headshaking, and all other potential causes should be thoroughly explored. A full veterinary check-up including a dental exam is recommended. And unfortunately, in some horses, the reason for headshaking can never be positively determined.