



## Question raised by requestor

Does a horse suffer if it is kept alone without company from other horses? And what is the case if it is kept with other non-horse equids or some other species such as cows, lambs or rabbits?



## Answer

### Social behavior with conspecifics

Under feral conditions or on pasture, horses form groups (harems) that are comprised of several mares, their offspring up to 2–3 years of age and one to six adult males. The group size ranges from 2 to 21 horses. Young colts (> 2 years old) form 'bachelor' bands with up to 16 males, before joining other groups, where the stallion has died or been chased away.

Social contact and companionship are two of the most important basic needs for horses. They form relationships with conspecifics to fulfil their physiological and behavioural needs. Housing systems that limit social interaction between horses have a negative impact on equine welfare. Higher concentrations of fecal glucocorticoids have been reported for single housed horses with no physical contact, compared to group housed horses. Additionally, a positive cognitive bias has been detected in horses that have access to pastures and conspecifics, after a long period (6 months) of individual housing. To achieve a high level of welfare, horses should be kept in company of other horse(s), in order to see, hear, smell and have physical contact with one another on a daily basis. It is not required to have physical contact throughout the day, but at least have the opportunity to fulfil this need during housing or at pasture.

Moreover, solitary housing increases the risk of stereotypy and undesirable reactions, such as biting or kicking. Keeping horses in groups from an early age contributes to the development of their social skills and makes them less aggressive and more adaptive to training and handling. Group management is important to maintain social structure and low levels of aggression. Aggressive behaviours toward conspecifics are related with competition over resources, sexual competition, fear, dominance or territory. Hierarchy in horses appears to be linear (forming triangular relationships in large groups) and not necessarily based on age, weight, height, gender, or time in the group. Horses do not easily adapt to regular regroupings, because it disrupts the hierarchy and results in an increased level of agonistic interactions.

### Relationship with other species

Horses should always be kept together with conspecifics. However, in case of social isolation, the company of other species may to some extent be beneficial for horses. Humans may meet some of the social needs of horses, when they interact for a large part of the day, as in the case of working horses. Horses are able to remember previous experiences of working with humans or negative relations with them and are more willing to interact with people with positive attitudes.

There is a scarcity of research data regarding the effect of non-horse companion animals on horse welfare. However, there is evidence that horses can adapt to the companionship of other species, such as goats and sheep ('stable companions'), although they prefer to be with their conspecifics. A comparative analysis of horses' heart rate parameters and locomotor activity when they were in a herd or in isolation, with or without the company of goats showed that the company of goats in the paddock only partially limited the effects of the social isolation of horses and reduced their restlessness. However, the horses' emotions change positively only when goats accompany horses in a herd.



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