

WIND SUCKING

By Rick Wolfe DVM

This term is often applied to TWO entirely different problems in a horse. The first is simply cribbing. This is a condition or actually a habit whereby the horse places the front teeth on an object such as the boards on a fence, the stall door, feed trough, the tailgate of your new pickup, etc., and proceeds to “suck” in air frequently making a grunting noise. Some horsemen call this condition wind sucking, and actually they are somewhat correct. A cribber does actually suck air. I am not going to discuss this condition further in this article, but perhaps address this subject at another time.

Another condition called wind sucking in a horse refers to air entering the vagina of a filly or mare. This happens most often when a horse is performing, particularly at a dead run. Air actually enters the vaginal canal. This may conflict with the horse’s performance immediately as the mechanical flow of the air apparently “gooses” some horses and they seem to shut down their task at hand. Also, the air may irritate the lining of the vaginal area causing soreness, inflammation and possibly localized infection and even uterine infections. This does NOT happen in all females, but it is very common. Frequently the conformation or angle of their external genitalia (female parts) is a contributing factor whether or not the filly will “suck air.” Many of these fillies will act as though they are in heat as they tend to urinate small amounts frequently and display other symptoms similar to being in heat. After a performance the affected horse may release the air from the vagina actually making a variety of sounds.

The treatment for this condition is very simple. A veterinarian will suture about two thirds of the vulva (external part of the vagina) totally closed so that air cannot enter as easily and still allow the mare or filly to urinate normally. This simple procedure is called a Caslicks surgery. This does not interfere with future breeding and in fact is extremely helpful in a mare that is a wind sucker to prevent uterine infections. Of course the area may have to be opened enough for actual breeding when the time comes. The surgery consists of prepping the area, injecting a local anesthetic, cutting a very small amount of tissue on both sides of the vulva and suturing it together. Cutting the area to create a very small intentional “wound” is very important so that both sides actually “grow” together. This tissue that attaches itself is very thin, perhaps one eighth of an inch or so. If this is not done the stitches will not hold. Most veterinarians remove the suture material at a later date leaving a very cosmetic surgery site. An important side note is to remember to totally open the area before foaling if a mare is pregnant.