

Proper use of a twitch . . .

A "twitch" is defined as a sudden jerk - a spasm that may be associated with a twinge of pain. That is exactly what we don't want to cause when we twitch a horse.

Twitching a horse properly provides the handler with a means of achieving some control over the animal. This is accomplished by using pressure on certain points on the horse's body, causing the release of endorphins - organic compounds that produce a mildly euphoric mental state and create a sense of well-being.

The most common twitch is a stick with a rope or chain loop attached to one end. This is usually used on the horse's nose. The loop is placed over the nose, then the stick is twisted, shrinking the loop as it tightens on the upper lip. Twist the loop until the pressure is tight enough that the horse cannot shake out of it.

This means the handler will use differing degrees of pressure for different situations. If a mare is being aggressive toward a stallion, the pressure will have to be greater than that needed to provide a mild distraction from a procedure such as palpation or being checked for ear ticks.

Once the loop has tightened on the nose, begin a count. Count "1001, 1002." Give the twitch a quick turn, then release back to the beginning position. Begin again. "1001, 1002." Twist and release. "1001, 1002." Twist and release. This rhythmic, pulsating sensation is an important part of effectively using a twitch, so continue it as long as you wish the horse to remain calm.

Leave the twitch on only as long as necessary. If the horse needs to be calmed for longer than five minutes, remove the twitch, allow feeling to return to the area, then retwitch and finish.

Besides the nose, there are other twitch sites on a horse's body that release endorphins and allow a measure of restraint. Twitching the ear is sometimes referred to as a "wild-man" twitch. This is probably because it takes a wild man (or woman) to twist the ear, pull down the horse's head, then stick the tip of the ear into their mouth. The person's molars are then applied to the tip of the ear in a

grinding motion, creating the rhythmic pressure-release sensation.

For those of us who are less adventuresome or with impaired dental ability, the same stick twitch that was used on the nose can be applied to the base of the horse's ear. The same twist-and-release procedure used on the nose is used on the base of the ear.

A shoulder twitch can be created by grasping a roll of skin in the neck-shoulder groove and pulling that roll rhythmically. This may immobilize the horse enough to allow the handler to apply a nose or ear twitch.

How a twitch is presented to the horse is a critical part of practicing this type of restraint. Do not attempt to capture the body part to be twitched with a frantic or abrupt grab. Approach the area with soft hands, slowly caressing the area. With your hand through the loop, as gently as you can, hold the ear or nose

and slip the loop over the area.

The way you release the twitch is as important as how you apply it. Removal of the twitch should be a continuation of the euphoric experience. Remove it slowly by unwinding the twist in the loop. Do not let the horse jerk himself free. Maintain control after the twitch has been undone by holding the twitched body part in your hand. Then quietly massage the area to stimulate the return of circulation and feeling.

The last thing that happens during the twitching procedure is what the horse will remember. Make it pleasurable and the horse will not object to being twitched. Make it miserable and the horse will try and avoid twitching in the future.

— Dr. Jim and Lynda McCall

