

Social interaction and comfort behaviour

Under natural conditions horses live close together in stable groups.

Horses will generally become anxious and relatively insecure when isolated from other horses. In domestic horses, lack of social contact both early and later in life causes stress and possibly development of abnormal behaviour, such as stereotypies and increased aggression.

Important facts to remember...

- Horses communicate through vision, sound, smell, posture and touching.
- Touching can be both aggressive (kicking and biting) and friendly (grooming).
- Young horses who are kept isolated have difficulty in engaging with other horses if introduced into a group at a later stage.
- Horses prefer full physical direct contact in paddocks, on pasture or in group housing.



Social space

- Horses have a social space, which defines the distance that they wish to keep from other horses.
- This distance is individual, and is dependent on age and on how well the horses know each other.
- During social grooming, for example, the distance is zero. Horses may also be seen standing close together when trying to keep insects away. Foals and young horses appear to have a very narrow or less developed social space and they may be seen lying close together.

! When horses are group housed, it is important to take social space into account when deciding how much space they should be given.