Monica Aleman, MVZ Cert, PhD, Dipl. ACVIM, an associate professor at the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine who has a special interest in neuromuscular disorders, described steps involved in a such an exam, stressing that following a consistent order helps the veterinarian avoid missing abnormalities. Neurologic cases aren't always part of a veterinarian's day to day practice, so a good review of neurologic principles is often helpful to the practitioner.

At the 2015 American Association of Equine Practitioners Convention, held Dec. 5-8 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Dr. Aleman described some of the effects of lesions in specific neuroanatomic locations. Where is the lesion? Is it a single neurologic lesion and/or a concurrent musculoskeletal problem. Depending on the horse's degree of ataxia (unsteadiness or incoordination), the veterinarian examines him at the walk, trot, canter; up and down inclines; and up and over curbs to help determine his coordination.

The practitioner also carefully examines head, neck, trunk, tail, and limb posture, as well as the horse's signalment (breed, gender, and age), intended use, and medical history. If the horse is not cooperative, sedation might be necessary to complete the exam in a timely manner. The exam must be tailored to the individual relative to the horse's cooperation and training, said Dr. Aleman.

The veterinarian evaluates the cranial nerves, which control smell, a variety of reflexes, reactions and responses to stimuli, and is an important part of neurologic exam. Cranial nerve evaluation is important because it can also aid in ruling out pain, a common issue in the equine patient. When performing cranial nerve evaluation, the veterinarian checks the horse's eye for nystagmus, that is, a rapid back and forth movement of the eye, also known as the vestibuloocular reflex. If the horse displays a nystagmus that is not normal, the veterinarian should evaluate the horse for ataxia (incoordination), because it can result from mechanical musculoskeletal or lameness issues. Similarly, a very compliant and cooperative horse might leave a leg wherever it is placed simply due to training and good nature. Any abnormal finding is noted and recorded for future reference.

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