



## What is it like to be a horse in Switzerland?

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### Key words

Equids, horse, housing, feeding management

### Aim of the study

This study aimed to investigate the status quo of the living conditions of equids in Switzerland in order to highlight new trends and identify in which fields more research and knowledge transfer are needed.

### Material and methods

An online-survey was sent to more than 16'000 equids owners registered in the Swiss Animal Tracing Database (*Tierverkehrsdatenbank*, TVD). Participants were requested to answer 45 questions about housing conditions, feeding practices, and training habits of their equids. Two different questionnaires were created, one for people owning 1 to 10 equids (group 1) and a simplified one for people owning more than 10 equids (group 2). The response rate was 24% for group 1 and 18% for group 2. This enabled the gathering of data of about 12'743 equids.

### Results and significance

As not all owners answered all questions, the n-number is given as an indication for each result.

The results of the survey reveal that 48% (n=11'688) of the equids are all the time housed in groups. Compared to the findings of similar surveys conducted in 1997 (15% of the equids housed in groups, Bachmann and Stauffacher 2002) and in 2004 (30% of the equids housed in groups, Knubben et al. 2008), this represents a strong increase of the number of group-housed equids in Switzerland. The most frequent group-housing systems are the *Mehrraumlaufstall* and the *Einraumlaufstall* (group-stalls with free access to an adjoining paddock, with or without a separate feeding area), which respectively house 23% and 18% of the equids. The remaining 7% are housed in other group-housing facilities such as *Einraum-Gruppenbox*, *Mehrraum-Gruppenbox* (group-stalls without free access to an adjoining paddock) and pasture with a shelter. Regarding individual housing, the *Aussenbox* (outdoor individual-stall), the *Innenbox* (indoor individual-stall) and the *Auslaufbox* (individual-stall with adjoining paddock) respectively house 9%, 16% and 24% of the equids. The remaining 3% live in individual pastures with a shelter. In this survey, no horses were announced to be housed in tie stalls. These findings suggest that equids-owners in Switzerland are currently opting for housing systems more oriented towards fulfilling animal's needs.

Regarding feeding practices, 43% (n=9'049) of the equids receive all or part of their forage in a slowfeeding system designed to increase the feeding time. Despite the widespread use of these systems, 42% (n=10'449) of the equid owners estimate that their animal undergoes periods longer than 5 hours without access to forage. These fasting periods are of concern in terms of animal welfare, as they are known to have negative impacts on the digestive system and to increase the risk for behavioural disorders like stereotypies.

In addition, it seems that equid owners start to change their riding habits. Indeed, 12% (n=7'100) of ridden equids are always or occasionally ridden with a bitless bridle. Furthermore, 47% (n=11'697) of all the equids gathered in this study were barefoot (including young and unriden equids).

The findings of this study confirm the increasing amount of equids housed in groups and in individual-stall with adjoining paddock at the expense of more traditional housing systems. The long term impact of the new trends observed in the horse industry (eg. feeding in a slowfeeding system, riding bitless and unshod) on the welfare of the equids will need to be examined scientifically and the knowledge transfer will have to be adapted accordingly.

### **Publications, posters and presentations**

This study will result in several publications. We aim to publish it in English in a peer-reviewed journal as well as in French and German to make it accessible for the Swiss horse industry. These results will also be included in all the conferences and classes given at the Swiss national stud farm. In addition, the new trends highlighted in this survey will be taken into account when planning research projects and preparing the new teaching programs (Equigarde, Equine sciences HAFL, Equiday, etc.) in order to better answer the new needs of knowledge.

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