



Clip happy

Most horses tolerate it, others hate it. Here Michael Peace explains how to make clipping a nice experience for both of you

About Michael

Michael Peace uses his unique 'Think Equus' philosophy to help horses and riders of all levels to achieve their ultimate goals.

As for nervous horses, Michael advises: "Work with your horse and watch his reactions closely. And remember to reward even the slightest try."

To book your horse in for training or a home visit with Michael, call ☎ 01865 842806 or visit his website www.michaelpeace.co.uk



Clipping is one of those processes that some horses accept quite easily and quickly, and others resist with all their strength.

A horse's attitude will largely be coloured by his early handling. If he has been introduced to new things in a way that helps him progressively to overcome his anxieties, he'll soon understand that clippers are not going

to kill him. If he is pinned down and forced to accept clipping, his attitude will be entirely different – terrified and possibly angry, he'll try to flee or fight, both of which are dangerous.

Many people who own horses like to resort to having them sedated while they're clipped, but this is not ideal. For one it's expensive, and also it does little to reassure the horse that clipping is acceptable.

So here I'm going to show you how to introduce a youngster to clipping for the first time, and explain the basic steps you need to take to help him accept them, then I'll offer some tips for horses who are clipper-phobic and hate every aspect of the job.

NOTE If you have either type of horse, read the whole article, as there are tips that can help throughout.

Be prepared

Before you start, make conditions right for you and the horse:

- I like to introduce clippers outside, so the horse doesn't feel trapped. On a good surface and in an enclosed space, like an arena, is ideal.
- A long rope on the headcollar means you can give him space to move without losing him altogether.
- I also like to use clippers which are quite small and light, so they're minimally scary. They're powered by a battery pack, so you aren't limited by the length of cord or where the sockets are situated. Plus, it's much safer. The last thing you want is for your nervous horse to tread on an electric cord and give himself a shock!

Clipping the first-timer



Hold the horse loosely and switch the clippers on

1 Holding the horse loosely, I show him the clippers and oscillate them in my hand to mimic the movement I'll use on his coat. Then I switch the clippers on. If he stands still and accepts the sound, I leave them running briefly then switch them off to reward him, and give him a

nice rub on the head. If he moves away, I'll move with him, not letting him get any further away from the clippers, until he stands still. I'll do this a few times. What you're aiming for is the horse standing quietly with his head low and his eyes soft while the clippers are running.



2 I get closer and expose the horse to the clippers running again. If he steps back, I let him go, then politely ask him to step back towards me. I don't drag him back to me, as he may think he needs to fight with me instead of us working together. If I'm polite to the horse, he'll believe I'm on his side – and I am!



4 Now I start clipping the neck. This might make him jump, but I stay with him if he moves about and only switch them off when he stands still. I repeat this until he's relaxed.



5 Now I start moving over the body in a similar way, stopping the clippers to reward the horse and praising him when he's working for me.

Top tip
Aim to help the horse succeed in accepting the clippers without using force.

Top tip
Praise is essential so make sure you tell the horse how good he is when he tries for you.



Move alongside him and stroke his neck

3 I change my position so I'm standing alongside the horse's shoulder facing his hindquarters. I move alongside him and stroke his neck with my left hand, with the

clippers running in my right hand. He might move about, but I stay with him and switch the clippers off when he stands still. I keep repeating this until the horse is relaxed.

Only reward your horse by stopping the clippers when he stands still



Take even more care around sensitive areas

6 With more sensitive areas like the head, I will start by touching then stroking the horse and praising him when he's working for me.

Then I actually start to clip his head – again, rewarding and praising him, and repeating the same thing until he is comfortable and relaxed.

Clipping tips

Remember to...

- Praise the horse – even for the tiniest effort
- Only reward him by stopping the clippers when he stands
- If he's tense, walk him about
- Give your horse plenty of time, keep lessons to about 20 minutes and repeat the next day(s) until he is happy.

Vital points

● Get your timing right! Often when a horse gets worried, the person switches the clippers off, but this is rewarding wrong behaviour. The horse will think that whatever he does to avoid the clippers is good, because it gets rid of them! He has to learn that standing still is good as it makes the clippers go off!

● Now and then, break up the clipping lesson and go for a walk. If a horse's legs and feet are moving, it undoes stress.

● Providing he's accepted the previous step, ask the horse to work a little harder – not so much that he's afraid, but with just enough pressure to get him through the learning curve.

● Don't con the horse by sedating him, or giving him food or creeping up to him without letting him see the clippers! Be businesslike: "This is what's going to happen, and I will help you achieve it."

● Be particular how you present your lesson. If the horse tries to end the lesson early, be disciplined and say: "No, I'm the head of the class, and I'll say when the lesson is over."



Clip phobic?

If you have a horse who is scared of clippers, you need to be really patient.

- Follow the steps below, and repeat each one as many times as it takes.
- Stop after 30 minutes, on a good note, and try again the next day with Step 1 again. It should take less time to reach yesterday's finishing point, then you can progress more.
- Allow plenty of time, from days to weeks, depending on how scared your horse is. He has to realise that the clippers won't kill him. Here's how!

Clipping a scared horse

Be prepared with a long rope, battery-powered clippers, and in an arena.

1 When you introduce the clippers, let the horse have about 10ft of space on the line. Turn the clippers on and oscillate them. If he moves about, move with him – but don't let him extend the distance between you. When he settles and stands, turn the clippers off to reward him. Repeat until he stands all the time. He may still be checking that he can get away, but he'll be loose in the mouth, soft in his head and eye, and may be licking and chewing.

NOTE: If the horse backs away in fright, let the rope out – never restrict him. Let him find a distance he's comfortable with and try to move him about on the end of the rope, rewarding forward movement towards you by turning the clippers off.



You will need to be really patient with clip-phobic horses

2 Shorten the distance between you and the horse and repeat Step 1 until he stands quietly.

3 Gradually get closer to the horse, asking him to work a little harder, exposing him to the clippers then switching them off when he stands. When you're close enough, reward the horse with a rub on the head. If the horse steps back, politely ask him to step forward again.

4 Shorten the lead rope a little and change your position (see Step 3 on page 91). Stroke his neck and when he accepts that, switch the clippers on with your right hand and stroke his neck with your left. He may move around or back off, but stay with him until you can rub his neck, then switch the clippers off. Don't try to con him by moving on a step before he has accepted the previous one.

NOTE Often at this point when you're next to the horse with the clippers, he may get agitated. Keep calm and keep with him, not grabbing or fighting but

directing him around you. Don't look at him, talk to him reassuringly and keep his attention on you.

5 Set the clippers running, and touch the back of the horse's neck with the back of the hand that's holding the clippers. He may jump and run, but keep with him and turn the clippers off when he stands still.

6 With the clippers running in your right hand, repeat the above, then turn the clipper over so the body touches him. Turn the clippers off when he stands still. Repeat as usual.

7 Gradually extend the area that you are stroking the horse with the back of the clippers behind his shoulder.

8 Repeat until the horse is happy to be clipped all over his body. For sensitive areas, approach with care. Use smaller clippers if possible, stroking the horse with the back of your hand holding the clippers near his head first, then with the back of the clippers, then clip the area carefully.