


Down in the dumps?

Quiet, withdrawn and placid to ride? Research says this might be a sign of a depressed horse, reports **Peter Green MRCVS**



ONE sign of depression in humans is “anhedonia” – the loss of pleasure that people in a healthy mental state derive from things that are generally enjoyable. Another sign is the tendency to become withdrawn, unresponsive and negative towards normal social activity.

Depression in animals is notoriously hard for researchers to investigate, but one factor that can be used in horses is that the taste of sugar (sucrose) appears to be universally pleasurable.

Assessing mood

SCIENTISTS have recently pondered whether some quiet, withdrawn riding horses might actually be depressed. They studied 20 horses from the same stables and assessed which appeared more engaged with their environment

and which seemed withdrawn and uninterested in what was going on.

They then offered all the horses sugar blocks in the stables and monitored sugar consumption for the next 30 hours, during which time they also recorded the way the horses spent their time. To make sure they were not just recording different appetites, adjustments were made to the results based upon the usual hay consumption of each horse.

Surprising outcomes

THE results revealed a direct correlation between sugar consumption and

apparent levels of withdrawal. The more withdrawn horses were less interested in the sugar, which was interpreted as highly suggestive of anhedonia.

This interpretation was strengthened by the fact that the withdrawn horses had a significantly higher level of stereotypic behaviours, such as box walking, crib biting and weaving, all of which are recognised indicators of stress.

Perhaps withdrawn horses are not just quiet, but depressed? **H&H**