

Key Concepts:

- This restraint technique is very effective to maintain restraint of a horse for periods of up to 15 minutes, after which time the lip twitch should be removed.
- The lip twitch reportedly causes a release of endorphins in the horse, and as such it is the only form of “restraint with benefits” from the horse’s perspective 😊
- There is risk of injury to personnel or to the horse if the handler loses their grip on the lip twitch during use – beware of flying bats!

Background Information:

Application of an upper lip twitch is a useful form of restraint to allow you to perform more prolonged procedures (up to 15 minutes)... such as passing a stomach tube or performing a trans-rectal palpation examination. The trick to applying a lip twitch is to do it right the first time – if a horse can successfully evade your first attempt at placing the lip twitch, they will be significantly more difficult to even get near for your second attempt!

Lip twitches vary in style – at local barns you may have seen commercially available, “self retaining” lip twitches (aka “humane twitches”) that look like a giant aluminum nut cracker; these are useful for placing on a horse and clipping to the halter, in order to allow an owner to work alone when doing such tasks as clipping the haircoat or having the farrier perform a foot trim. However, these twitches are generally not effective enough to accomplish the more invasive techniques that veterinarians may need to perform. At OVC, we use long handled twitches crafted from baseball bats. This style of lip twitch provides the handler with the ability to obtain a very firm grip on the upper lip, and the length of the bat allows the handler to remain on the ground while still holding the twitch if the horse decides to rear up. When you start seeing cases in our Veterinary Teaching Hospital, you will notice that the lip twitches (bats) are painted; this allows the wood to be sealed (to prevent swelling and splitting) during the repeated cleaning and disinfecting that is done between uses on different patients.

Aside: Do you recall the difference between cleaning and disinfecting that you learned about during the Infection Control Module?... 😊

Although the use of an upper lip twitch is a very humane form of horse restraint when applied and used appropriately, the owner’s perception of a lip twitch may be quite different. It is therefore advisable to always seek permission from the owner before placing a lip twitch on their horse.

Application of an Upper Lip Twitch (aka “Nose twitch”): (video script)

Before you approach the horse with the lip twitch, get prepared: Make sure your handler moves back to the shoulder of the horse (this is to move them out of your way so that you don't accidentally hit them with the end of the bat!). Also, check that you are holding the rope loop of the twitch open with one hand, and holding the bat with the other hand.

Troubleshooting: It is really, really helpful to place the rope loop along your fingernails (as demonstrated in the video) so that the loop slides forward onto the horse's upper lip rather than slipping back over your hand as you try to grab the upper lip! Also, keep one finger out of the loop; then if the loop slides back at all, it does not make it back onto your wrist (where it is nearly impossible to slide it off from!!)

Once you have moved your handler and checked your finger position in the rope loop of the twitch, approach the horse's head from the side and gently get hold of the horse's halter with the same hand that is holding the bat. Align the bat up the side of the horse's head, with the rope loop lined up with the nose. You are going to use your hand to hold both the bat and the halter at once, so that you have good control over the horse's head while you are trying to slip the loop onto the horse's upper lip...

Troubleshooting: The closer you are to the horse's nose with the hand holding the halter and bat, the more control you will have of the horse's head. Holding the bat and halter up near the horse's eye is not going to give you ANY control over the head! (So choke up on the bat, as they say!)

Once you have the horse's head held firmly, slip the loop of the twitch over the horse's upper lip. Grab a large handful of the horse's upper lip with that hand, and don't let go!!! This hand is now the one controlling the horse's head, while your other hand lets go of the halter and carefully lowers the twitch handle (bat) down from alongside the horse's head. Once the bat is down in front of the horse, start twisting the bat with one hand (the other hand is still desperately holding onto the horse's upper lip).

Troubleshooting: Do not start twisting the bat until you have moved it down in front of the horse. If you start twisting it while the bat is still alongside the horse's head, you may accidentally hit the horse in the head with the end of the bat... and that never ends well!

To make one-handed twisting of the bat a little easier, you may choose to tuck the bat into your armpit to help hold it while you reposition your hand each time you twist it (as demonstrated in the video). Be careful to keep your head well back out of the way of the horse's head if you do this!!! Continue twisting the bat with one hand until you have twisted it as much as you can. Then, slowly

let go of the horse’s upper lip with your other hand. Now place both hands on the bat, and do another couple of twists to make sure the twitch is on tightly.

Troubleshooting: The most common reason people fail to effectively apply a lip twitch is that they don’t twist the loop tight enough before letting go of the lip with the other hand. Do it right the first time!! You may not be given a second chance by the horse otherwise... ☺

Once the bat is firmly on the upper lip of the horse, pass the bat to the handler, so that they are the only person in control of the horse – it can be too confusing for the horse if one person is holding the lead shank and another person is holding the twitch – which person do they listen to when they are in the middle of flipping out?! Before handing the bat off to the handler, verbally check with them to be sure they have a firm grip on the bat (“Got it?” ...“Got it!”).

Troubleshooting: Anytime when you are passing the bat handle between people is risky for accidentally having the bat come loose – as soon as the horse perceives that the loop is loosening at all, the horse will try to help by shaking their head vigorously. This could result in the twitch becoming airborne and hitting someone (or the horse) and causing injury. **NEVER let go of the twitch!!!! If you do lose your hold on the twitch when restraining a horse, quickly and loudly inform those around you so that they can protect their heads right away!**

Application of an upper lip twitch causes a release of endorphins in the horse – you may notice that the horse relaxes after a minute or so (their eyes may become partially closed and they may drop their head slightly when this happens). However, the twitch also impairs blood flow to the upper lip, so be sure to remove the twitch after 10 – 15 minutes at most, in order to restore circulation. The effectiveness of the twitch may diminish by this time anyway as the lip becomes numb.

To remove the twitch at the end of the procedure, first ensure that both you and the handler have your heads safely away from the horse’s head. Hold the bat in both hands and quickly untwist it.

Troubleshooting: As the loop of the twitch loosens, the horse will often try to help you get it off their nose by shaking their head (don’t get hit by their head!). Once the twitch is off, the horse may try to rub their nose on any nearby object. Do not allow them to rub their lip on a person though – someday that naughty habit might be practiced on a small child (who will become airborne!) instead of you.

Immediately once the lip twitch has been removed, provide the horse with copious positive reinforcement (patting, verbal praise) so that they do not associate lip twitching with only negative experiences.

NOTE: The long handled twitch is intended for use only on the upper lip!

DO NOT apply this twitch to other parts of the horse’s body (such as their ear).