

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why do horses sleep standing up?

October 3, 2025

Jane 00:20

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from kids all over who are curious about the world around them, like you are, and it's our job to find interesting people who can offer answers. You've been sending us questions about horses for years, so we thought it was high time to do an episode all about them. When we were in Iceland a few months ago, we visited a school for kids and sometimes adults, who want to learn how to care for and ride horses. Sometimes they even do horseback riding competitions. The woman who owns the school and cares for all of the horses there is named Sonja Noack. She invited us to meet a few of her horses and learn more. And I love the name of her school, Hestasnilld. It's a combination of two Icelandic words, hesta, horse, and nild, genius. So her school's name, Hestasnilld, is basically horse genius!

Sonja Noack 01:22

We have here, Twister, my horse, my pace horse. He is looking at us and Skiði and Kulu, three of my horses.

Jane 01:34

So Kulu is a beautiful gray horse. Describe that beautiful color.

Sonja Noack 01:40

He's blue dun, actually, and he has a little star. The dun horses, they have this black...

Jane 01:50

Like a black line almost on his spine.

Sonja Noack 01:53

Down the spine, exactly.

Jane 01:54

And his mane is two different colors too. It's kind of almost a dark brown or black and then an almost white color.

Sonja Noack 02:02

Yeah, it's under it's dark, and upper is light, and they are actually just like, it's not from the sun. It's just happened to be like this in that kind of color when they are blue dun.

Jane 02:15

He seems kind of quiet and shy, but your white horse over here seems to want some attention, and he's got a beautiful set of bangs that he keeps throwing his head back to show us. Do they have different personalities?

Sonja Noack 02:26

Oh yes, they are very different. And also, like, Kulu has been working this morning, and he's chilling a little bit. We have been riding two hours this morning with the kids and Skiði, he hasn't been working today, and he's just waiting for his time today to do something fun.

Jane 02:43

And what's Twister thinking?

Sonja Noack 02:45

Twister probably just wants to say hello and get some cuddles from you. He loves attention.

Jane 02:49

Twister, do you want to say hello to the microphone? It's not food. Twister would like to eat my sweater and the microphone.

Sonja Noack 03:00

He loves food.

Jane 03:03

We have a lot of horse questions, and since we're here in Iceland, let's start with Poppy's question.

Poppy 03:09

My name is Poppy, and I'm from London, Vermont, and I'm 11 years old, I would like to know more about the history of the Icelandic horses.

Jane 03:16

Are Icelandic horses special?

Sonja Noack 03:18

Oh yes, they are. They're very special. They are, actually, very, very, very long time ago, they came here with boats, with the Vikings, mostly from Norway, but not only, but mostly. And what makes it very special now it's that the Icelandic horse has been bred pure over 1000 years, and that means too, which is sometimes a little bit sad, but all Icelandic horses that leave Iceland, they may never come back. So it's very pure breed, and probably the purest breed in the world,

Jane 03:55

Because it hasn't been cross bred with other horse breeds, because other horses aren't allowed in Iceland, and so these horses are all descended from those horses that came across with the Vikings.

Sonja Noack 04:07

Exactly, exactly.

Jane 04:09

Since it's an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, Iceland can keep some pretty strict controls about what comes in and what goes out of its country. And Iceland has decided that the Icelandic horse is a breed they want to protect and control. The country allows horses to leave Iceland, so you can find them in lots of other countries, but you won't find any other kinds of horses in Iceland, which means these horses are pretty similar to the ones brought to Iceland by Viking explorers and settlers over 1000 years ago. Icelandic horses are known for being on the small side, but most Icelandic people would be annoyed if you called them ponies.

Sonja Noack 04:48

They are having a lot of fur and a long mane, and most of them thick mane and tail, which makes them extremely beautiful, of course. And they are very... so many different colors, which is also special for the Icelandic horse.

Jane 05:04

So horses in Iceland need to be able to withstand some pretty harsh weather. How do these horses make it through really cold winters and oftentimes a lot of wind and snow and rain?

Sonja Noack 05:17

They have very, very good and long fur, and they are built like... they are not like very long leg most of them. They are like, a little bit, you know, strongly built. And they just eat a lot. Especially the ones that are just outside, they have to eat a lot, specially in the fall, to get fat and everything, and which helps the skin to take care when rain is coming and snow and wind, because then it will peel away the cold and the wind and the snow, and then we, of course, give them... We are feeding them outside. They are not they're maybe very, very big fields, but we are giving them hay as snow, as soon as the snow is there and they can't get the grass anymore.

Jane 06:00

you'd probably want a long mane and thick fur if you were going to spend the winter outside in the wind and snow of Iceland, too. Icelandic horses are also known for having a special way of running. You may have heard of a walk, a trot, a canter and a gallop, but Icelandic horses can do two other styles. We'll have Sonja saddle up and ride one of her horses a little later on, so you can hear what we mean. But first, let's get to some of your other questions.

Parker 06:26

I'm Parker. I'm seven years old. I live in Pennsylvania. Why are horses so big?

Jane 06:31

Why are horses so big?

Sonja Noack 06:34

Yeah, they were not so big for a million years ago or something. They were like small as a dog, and then they have been getting bigger because it's easier to run away from the predators. And it's also about, you know, then they are a little bit higher up, so they see better when there's coming something, something dangerous. But of course, it's very different. We have, like, really, really small ponies, Falabella pony in the world. They are, like, so small as a dog still. So it's very different. They can be from dog size up to very big.

Jane 07:06

As Sonja said, when the ancestors of horses first started appearing, actually more like 56 million years ago, they were quite small. But over time, they've gotten much bigger and taller. Modern horses have so much variety because humans got involved in breeding them and selecting horses for different characteristics, like being really fast or being able to pull a heavy load or being tall. So that's why there are so many different types and sizes of horse bodies today.

Henry 07:36

My name is Henry. I'm five years old. I live in Kokomo, Indiana. Why do horses have a tail?

Riggs 07:44

My name's Riggs, I'm five years old, and I live in Lincoln, California. Why do horses have tails?

Jane 07:52

Henry wants to know why do horses have tails? And so does Riggs.

Sonja Noack 07:56

Yeah, the tail is actually, it's very important for the horse to to push away the flies, mostly. It's, and also, of course, it's a protective for their butt and the main it's also from for the rain. And also, when horses bite each other, it is giving kind of protection with the neck.

Omer 08:16

My name is Omer, and I live in Princeton, New Jersey, and I'm six years old. Why do horses have hairs on their back?

Jane 08:24

Why do they have hairs on their back? What's the deal with the mane?

Sonja Noack 08:27

Yeah, the mane is like protective and also on the back, the hair, the hair everywhere. Of course, they are mammals, and they need, they have the hair to protect their skin, and especially the Icelandic horse, which is a lot outside, and when it's cold, it's just protective against the weather. It's very, very long in the winter, and thick and and then when they change their fur, you know, then it's a lot of hair everywhere.

Jane 08:56

They shed like a dog.

Sonja Noack 08:57

Yes, more. You could probably to pillow out of it.

Jane 09:02

That would be quite a pillow.

Sonja Noack 09:03

Yeah, it would be quite a pillow.

June 09:04

My name is June. I'm three years old. How does horses' legs move?

Jane 09:13

Horses have really interesting legs. The part you might think looks like their knee bends in different directions, depending on whether you're looking at the front legs or the back legs. The front legs bend out towards the front and the back legs bend back behind the horse. But here's something you might not know. Those aren't their knees. Their knees are actually much higher up in their body, so you can't really see them unless you have X-ray vision, and can look at the horse's skeleton. The part you see bending when they run is more like an ankle joint, and horses actually walk on their toes.

Olivia 09:49

My name is Olivia, and I'm four years old. I'm from Clayton, Indiana. Why do horses have hooves?

Bonnie 09:56

My name is Bonnie. I am 6 years old. I live in Eugene, Oregon. Why do horses have hooves?

Chloe 10:04

My name is Chloe. I live in Thailand. I am six and a half years old. I do horses have hooves and we don't?

Sasha 10:15

My name is Sasha. I live in Tahoma, California. I'm four years old. Why are horse hooves flat, not round?

Audrey 10:30

My name is Audrey. I'm five years old. Are horses' hooves bones or not?

Jojo 10:36

My name is Jojo. I live in Webster, New York. Why do horses wear shoes?

Jane 10:43

Let's talk about hooves, that very bottom part of a horse's leg. The hoof has several parts, including some internal bones, tendons and ligaments, some cushiony bits that act like a shock absorber, and a hard part around the outside made of keratin. That's the same stuff your fingernails and toenails are made out of. Keratin is also what horns are. When it's thick, like a horse's hoof, keratin is very tough stuff. That outer wall, that part that's kind of like a big, thick toenail on the horse is constantly growing. If a horse is running around on rough ground, all that rubbing and scuffing can keep the hoof filed down. But a lot of horses need to have their hooves filed down by people, and many horses wear horse shoes. They look pretty different than our sneakers, though. Their shoes are metal and just go right around that hard outer wall of the hoof. They help protect the horse's foot, especially on pavement or other surfaces that would wear those hooves down pretty quickly.

Audrey 11:43

Hi, my name is Audrey. I live in California. What do horses eat?

Jane 11:48

Audrey wants to know just generally, what do horses eat? Other than my microphone.

Sonja Noack 11:54

They eat mostly grass and hay, which is, of course, dried grass. That's what they eat mostly, and we always try to, at least, I give my horses always also vitamins, and some of them get, like, also kind of extra food out of corn or something. Depends a lot on the horse. What they need, if they need extra food, but what they eat mostly is grass.

Henry 12:22

Hi. I'm Henry. I live in Alberta, Canada. I'm six years old. Why can horses eat grass when it can't hurt our stomachs?

Jane 12:28

Why can horses eat grass and hay when that would hurt our stomachs?

Sonja Noack 12:35

They have just a totally different digestive system than us, and also, they get a lot of energy, for example, out of the grass, as we wouldn't, not at all. And, yeah, we can't digest the grass with our stomach.

Elina 12:51

My name's Elina. I'm nine years old. I live in Barry in Wales. Can horses taste sweet and sour?

Sonja Noack 12:58

Yes, they can. And they love sweet, actually. And they also can taste like bitter, and salt. And bitter, for example, is very interesting. It can be, you know, they will feel it when there is something poisoned, like poisoned plants, they are bitter. So they won't, won't eat it, but they love sweet.

Ronan 13:19

Hi, I'm Ronan. I live in Charleston, South Carolina. I'm nine years old. Why do horses sleep standing up?

Jane 13:26

Horses can sleep standing up because their bodies are designed to allow them to do it. Unlike ours! We'd most likely collapse if we fell asleep standing. But horses can lock their legs to help keep their body in place. And have you ever seen a horse standing tall on three legs while its fourth leg is bent and not taking any weight? As a horse naps, it rotates which leg is getting a break, so by the time it wakes up, all of its legs have gotten some time off. But there's another reason horses sleep standing up.

Sonja Noack 13:57

It's also very important for them that they could run away very fast when some predator would come. And so it's just about their nature that they could run away. But when they really want to sleep and get REM sleep, they need to lay down for that, and that's mostly for a short time. And when they are in a herd outside, normally you see always one or two standing at least, which are taking care if everything is fine for the others to sleep.

Jane 14:26

And I think if anybody's seen a horse lying down and watched it try to get up, you can see how that would take a long time. If something that really wanted to eat you was chasing you, it might put you in a very vulnerable position.

Sonja Noack 14:39

Yes, 100%.

Lucy 14:41

My name is Lucy. I live in Canada. Why do horses breathe through their mouth?

Jane 14:47

Why do horses breathe through their mouths?

Sonja Noack 14:50

They don't, actually, they can't. They breathe through their nose. They, they have very strong nostrils, and they can open it quite much up. They maybe would open the mouth and but it's not really the way for the air through the mouth. It's just for the food.

Jane 15:08

Phew, that was a lot of questions about horses, and we haven't even talked much about how they move. So get a drink of water, let those wiggles out and get ready for even more horse stuff.

Jane 15:21

This is But Why. Today we're learning all about horses from Sonja Noack, a riding instructor and all around lover of horses. Sonja runs a riding school in Mosfellsbær just outside of Reykjavik in Iceland. We talked with her in one of her barns, where three of her Icelandic horses calmly watched as she answered all of your horsey questions.

Felix 15:43

My name is Felix. I'm five years old. I am in Amherstburg, Ontario. Why do horses gallop?

Parker 15:51

My name is Parker, and my age is three, and I live in Wisconsin, Madison. How do horses gallop?

Jane 15:59

How and why do horses gallop?

Sonja Noack 16:02

It's just their way of running, and it's the way of they gallop that they can run away and run away fast, mostly out, also to run away from the predators. But also because they sometimes like to play and run around and have fun, like we sometimes like to run around and have fun.

Goldie 16:22

My name is Marigold, but they call me Goldie. I'm four years old. I live in Oakland, California. I would like to know how horses jump so high.

Sonja Noack 16:35

They have very strong muscles and very powerful hind leg which will help them, and then they will just give in and jump high.

Jane 16:46

Do horses jump naturally? Or is it something they need to be taught when you're working with a horse that's going to be a jumping horse?

Sonja Noack 16:53

Like with Icelandic horse, we don't jump much. We sometimes do it for fun, a little bit, but it's very different between different horses. You know, if they are outside in the field and there is something they have to go over, they would also jump over it. But they would probably often choose the way beside. But it depends so much about different characters. Some of them just love it. They really like to go over. I have some horses too. When it is somewhere, some something to jump over, they like to go there.

Jane 17:23

What about this guy? Does he like to jump?

Sonja Noack 17:25

No, he is not so much of a jumper. He's more of a he likes pace and going fast in pace. He's not so much of a jumper.

Sage 17:34

I'm Sage. I live in Colorado Springs. I'm 10 years old. Can horses swim?

Sonja Noack 17:39

Yes, they can, and that also, it's very different. Some of them really love the weather, and others not. It's like with us, but we when it's summer and nice weather, we often go without saddle and swim with them. That's so fun. It's very, we were just like last weekend. We were swimming with them and the horses, most of them really love it, too, and it's actually very good for the joints. And some people even send horses to swim training.

Jane 18:08

Wow, swim training.

Sonja Noack 18:09

Yes, because it's also, you know, it's so light for the joints and ligaments.

Jane 18:15

Yeah. So it's like, they get swimming lessons, but it's also kind of like physical therapy, or like, almost like a massage that can help the horses feel good.

Sonja Noack 18:23

Yeah, yeah, 100%. And horses that have been injured, it can help them to get good again.

Lucy 18:29

My name is Lucy, and I'm nine years old, and I live in Madison, Wisconsin. Why do horse trainers whip their horses and does it hurt them?

Sonja Noack 18:39

You know, if you whip the horse like hardly it would probably hurt them and but normally when, for example, we use the whip, when I have a whip, it's more thought about being a longer hand. For me, it's a little bit getting me a longer hand that I can help the horse to understand what I want. And then I will just put it very slightly at the horse to help him to move and understand what I want, because maybe my foot isn't reaching his hindquarters. And when I want to help the horse with that, I can use the whip a little bit so we are not using it for slamming the horse or something. It's more like a longer hand.

Jane 19:22

And also with your feet. Are you kicking them hard, and does it hurt when you kick?

Sonja Noack 19:26

No, we are trying to get the horse, having the horse as sensitive as they can be with, like using a little, you know, pressure with the with the feet. I want my horse to answer when I put my feet at the belly slightly, they should answer to go forward, and the same when I take the rein to stop and trying to have it very lightly that they answer when they you know, when we are fast to answer them and let them be, let them be when they answered, then they are also light. So it's, it's so more fun to do it this way and be nice together.

Jane 20:04

So you think of it as communication, nonverbal communication with the horse, where you're trying to tell the horse, here's what I'd like you to do, and then the horse is responding.

Sonja Noack 20:13

Yes, exactly. It is just helping us to communicate exactly, and that, of course, always it's the goal for us to have and do as little as possible. And if you look at the rider and you don't see what the rider does, and the horse, too, does a lot of stuff. It is very nice, and that's always the goal.

Emma 20:34

My name is Emma. I am seven and 11 months. I live in Madrid, Spain. Why are horses afraid of snakes?

Jane 20:44

Are horses afraid of snakes?

Sonja Noack 20:46

Yes, I would say they are because, of course, they could be dangerous. They could bite them, and they actually don't like anything because of that around their feet, like when you walk with a horse with a with a reins, yeah, and it's yeah, a leash or something, and hanging down with the feet they, most of them, don't like it, and could get scared. So also, when you ride and you ride over something, they can get a little bit afraid, because their feet are so important to them. Because, of course, when the feet are hurt, they can't run. And if there would be a predator that want to eat them, which is, of course, not so much of a problem anymore, but it's so deep in them that they are just trying to take care of their feet.

Jane 21:29

And the way horses' eyes work too. They can't necessarily see their feet if they're looking up right? So they they want to make sure there's nothing down by their feet that they can't see that could trip them up, especially if they're looking straight up or far ahead.

Sonja Noack 21:43

Yeah, exactly. We have like blind points, like blind spots right in front of the horse, under the head and right in front of them, and also all in the back. They don't see at all when you are behind the horse. That's why you always should take care when you walk behind the horse, take a big circle and not walk too near, because when they get afraid, they could, of course, kick just because they get scared and think something happens so and they don't see you there. And it's the same with like when something is on the ground, like a snake, for example.

Scarlett 22:16

I'm Scarlett and I'm from Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Why are there so many types of horses?

Jane 22:25

We've talked about the Icelandic horse, which is special and different from some other horse breeds. Why are there so many?

Sonja Noack 22:31

I would say it's because we have, of course, very different landscapes and very different you know, like when you go to the Sahara, it's, of course, very, very hot, and then the horses are just totally different bred, especially for that. And like here in Iceland, we we have the Icelandic horse, which is really good in the cold. So it's a lot about the breeding, about and also what you are going to do, or you are going to do dressage or gaited riding or jumping, or leisure writing or distance. So it's very, very much different. Difference between that and, yeah, out of it's, of course, very every horse has, or horse breed has all long story, or most of them.

Aurora 23:14

My name is Aurora. I'm 10 years old. No, not 10, 11. I live in Holland, Vermont. What's the most popular horse breed?

Sonja Noack 23:21

I heard it's the American Quarter Horse, actually. But yeah, I think Icelandic horses are actually very popular because of their gaits. And I think it's getting more and more also in America, in the United States, but all over the world, I heard it's the American Quarter Horse.

Jane 23:44

Sonja has about 30 or 35 horses at her riding school, and they're all Icelandic horses, of course, because other types aren't allowed in Iceland. I asked her if she had a favorite one.

Sonja Noack 23:55

Oh, that's a tough one. I really love Twister, the one we have here.

Jane 24:01

Yeah, but that's because we're standing in Twister's stall. You can't say you like somebody else better when we're standing right next to him.

Sonja Noack 24:06

Yes, I love him, but I also love and, you know, Skiði and, of course, I love all of them. I, I think it's very important like also with the riding school horses. I, I really like them all. They are very, very different characters, and I want them to be, and it's okay to be different characters. That makes it so fun, so and everyone has its qualities.

Jane 24:29

Like people. Everybody has a different personality.

Sonja Noack 24:32

100% and that's just perfect.

Jane 24:34

Before we let Sonia get back to her chores, we asked her to show us one more thing: the special ways Icelandic horses can move. When you think of how horses walk or run, you might think of a walk, a trot, a canter and a gallop, but Icelandic horses can do two more types, or gaits.

Sonja Noack 24:52

Yes, we have the tölt and tölt is the same. They are moving their legs, same as in walk. So all, there's always at least one foot on the ground which make it very smooth. They are not like jumping up in the air like in trot and gallop, where sometimes the feet are all like up in the air. So it's getting very smooth. And it can be from very slow to very fast. And it's, it's very fun to ride it. It's like sitting on a light, slightly moving sofa. When you have a good tölt horse and their pace, it's really fast. Has to be really fast to be really good. And it's mostly ridden out of the gallop. Then they you are going, lay the horse down to pace, as we call it, and put it into pace, and then that goes very fast. And it's a little bit like the camels, when they move the feet on both on the just both left feet, and then they flying, and then both right feet, and then they're flying, and then both left and so on so. And they are like stretching their head and run really fast like this. It's very fun to see.

Jane 26:08

What's the difference in the way it feels from a gallop to pace?

Sonja Noack 26:12

Gallop is more, you know, it's three-beat. So it's like doo doo doo, doo doo doo, doo doo so when it you always like having this circle moving and in pace, it's a little bit. It's just, it's, it's going so fast. So don't you, you don't have so much time to think it's just, it's a little bit...

Jane 26:34

You're making a hand expression like vibration.

Sonja Noack 26:37

Yeah, vibration, and going really fast. It's adrenaline, you need to get, you know, when you write really good flying pace, you will get sometimes, like a little bit like feeling at the knees and so and so, you get some adrenaline with it. And you don't ride it for a long time. It's mostly ridden like, you know, between 100 and 250 meters or 300 or something, but only short at once, because it takes a lot of energy of the horse, because they put everything in it.

Jane 27:08

Why would you use pace instead of gallop? When, what would the situation be where you would choose one over the other?

Sonja Noack 27:14

When I ride up a hill, for example, I would always choose the gallop. And when I ride straight, I would take the pace, if it's a straight line and enough place, space, you know, and a clear way, and then I would choose pace. And it's, it's just different because it's, it's something you ride not as often as the gallop. And gallop you of course, can also ride very slow but not flying pace.

Jane 27:43

Seeing how these horses move in their different strides or gaits would be great, right? But we're a podcast, so you can't see anything. But hearing can also be helpful. We asked Sonja if she and one of her horses would help demonstrate these different ways of moving that she was talking about. So she saddled up Krummi, a dark brown horse with an even darker mane, and we went to the riding ring. We attached a microphone to Sonja so you can hear Krummi's hooves and Sonja's description as she rides around the ring. So close your eyes and just listen for the next minute or two and see if you can hear the difference in each type of stride.

Sonja Noack 28:25

So I'm gonna go to trot now.

Sonja Noack 28:37

Now I'm gonna ride tolt, then gallop and then pace.

Jane 29:06

That was Krummi, the horse, and Sonja Noack, the rider. Thanks to Sonja for answering all of our many questions about horses. She's the owner of Hestasníld, a riding school in Mosfellsbær, Iceland. We have pictures and videos of Sonja and her horses on our Instagram and YouTube pages, if you'd like to see what an Icelandic horse looks like and what those different gaits look like. As always, if you have a question about anything, send it to us. We get a lot of questions, and we really wish we could answer them all. But even if we can't answer your question, we love hearing it. We want to know what's on your

mind, what you're feeling curious about, and what you think we could help you learn about. You can have an adult help you record your question using one of the free apps on a smartphone or tablet, and then you can send the file to questions@butwhykids.org. If you like our show, please leave a review or some stars on whatever platform you use to listen. It helps other kids discover us. Our show is produced by Sarah Baik, Melody Bodette and me Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.