

Emergency First Aid For Horses

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The most common veterinary complaints seen in horses are colic, lacerations, and lameness, all of which can be prevented to a degree. Difficult births is the most likely emergency to make you panic. All of these emergencies require a first aid plan of action.

First Aid Kits for Horse Owners

While many equine emergencies can be prevented, some are inevitably due to the nature of the horse and the nature of many horse facilities today. Having a first aid kit available where and when it is needed for use is a good idea. The barn and your horse trailer are the most logical places to keep a horse first aid kit. A small first aid kit in your saddlebag during trail rides is a good idea.

The first aid kit should be complete, compact, clean, well maintained, and up-to-date. A basic first aid kit for horses might contain:

BANDAGE MATERIAL (There are many types of bandage material that work well)

- 4X4 gauze squares (to clean and cover wounds and to hold wound medications in place)
- 4” wide roll gauze and roll cotton (to cover the gauze, pad the leg, and support the leg)
- Flexible, self-adhering leg wrap, such as Vetrap (to be used only over adequate padding)
- 2” wide adhesive tape (to hold everything together)
- Duct tape (where a water proof covering is needed)
- Bandage scissors

MEDICATIONS (There are a number of medications that might be useful. Make sure that you are aware of expiration dates and discard expired medications.)

- Mild soap for cleaning wounds
- Mild antiseptic for killing bacteria that will inevitably get into a wound
- Pain relieving drugs - Aspirin is available over the counter and your vet may be willing to prescribe drugs such as flunixin (Banamine), phenylbutazone (bute), or a tranquilizer
- Hypodermic needles and syringes will be needed if you use injectible products

MISCELLANEOUS, but potential necessary, items

- Twitch
- Rubber gloves
- Bucket and plastic bags to line the bucket (so that the inside is clean with each use)
- List of emergency phone numbers
- Tablet and pen to write down what you have found and what you have been advised to do
- Thermometer - Digital thermometers are quick and easy to use but batteries do run down. Mercury thermometers are more accurate, but slow (3 minutes), and breakable.
- Plastic bags, plastic containers, and a toolbox for keeping supplies together and clean

FOALING essentials

Towels

- Tail wraps
- Mild navel disinfectant
- Liquid soap
- OB sleeves
- Hair dryer
- Phosphate enemas and tetanus antitoxin (kept in the refrigerator)

Handling Emergencies

REMAIN CALM

- Horses will sense your panic and become nervous, making a bad situation worse
- Deep, measured breathing is very effective

VETERINARIAN

- Immediately call your veterinarian for advice or a visit
 - If you don't feel that you can handle the situation
 - If you are unsure what the problem is or how severe it is
 - Better safe than sorry

SAFETY FIRST

- Remember your personal safety. You won't do the horse any good if you get injured.

LOGICAL & PRACTICAL

- If logical and practical, move the horse where it can be confined and safely restrained

EXAMINATION (Assess the problem)

- Examine the entire horse to define the problem

ACTION

- Decide what needs to be done first (spurting blood needs attention immediately)

Examining the Horse

Exam 1. TEMPERATURE

- Normal rectal temperature of most adult horses is 99 to 101.5

Exam 2. PULSE RATE

- The pulse of the horse is taken by touching the facial artery where it crosses the jawbone near its center and counting the pulse for one minute
- The pulse rate in a normal, calm, adult horse is 25 to 48 beats per minute
- Resting pulse rates above 60 may indicate a problem

Exam 3. BREATHING RATE

- Measure by watching the chest and flank or putting your hand in front of the nostrils
- Normal rate of breathing for a calm, normal, adult horse is between 8 and 20 breaths per minute.

Exam 4. CAPILLARY REFILL TIME

- Capillary refill time measures how quickly blood moves to distant parts of the body
- Measure by pressing firmly on the gums above the teeth causing the area to become blanched out
- After releasing the pressure, normal color should return in 2 seconds or less
- Normal gum color should be light pink
- Blood loss and shock may cause pale or gray gums

Exam 5. DEHYDRATION

- Measure by pulling the skin away from the point of the shoulder
- When the skin is released, it should return to its normal position in 2 seconds or less
- If this takes longer than 2 seconds, the horse is dehydrated

Remember that normals may vary between horses and you should know your horse's normals before an emergency.

First Aid for Common Emergencies

Em 1. PENETRATION WOUNDS (Lacerations and Punctures)

- In cases of arterial bleeding (indicated by bleeding in spurts)
 - Put pressure on the wound using several gauze squares to stop or slow bleeding
 - Hold the gauze squares in place with roll gauze wrapped snugly around the injured area
 - Cover with a thick layer of roll cotton and then apply roll gauze over the top snugly (more pressure can be put on thicker bandages without danger of slowing blood flow to the area)
 - Hold everything in place with adhesive tape
 - If the original bandage becomes blood soaked, put more bandage on top rather than replacing the original bandage
- If arterial bleeding is not present
 - Clean the wound with mild soap and water removing any debris present
 - Rinse the wound with water (hosing the wound off may help) and dry the leg

- Put several gauze squares over the wound and hold the gauze in place with roll gauze
- Cover with roll cotton and an elastic leg wrap or hold in place with adhesive tape
- Check gum color and measure capillary refill time (Exam 4)
- Call your veterinarian for advice or a visit
- Check your records to learn when the horse last had a tetanus shot

Penetration wounds are often associated with poor fence and barn maintenance, barbed wire fencing, overcrowding, and frequent mixing of groups of horses that have not been kept together in the past.

Em 2. COLIC

- Abdominal pain from any source is referred to as colic
- Horse's may perspire, look at their side, tread their feet, exhibit abnormal posture, paw the ground, and lie down and roll
- Horses showing these signs should be examined for signs of shock
 - check gum color
 - measure capillary refill time (Exam 4)
 - measure dehydration (Exam 5)
- Remove the horse from any feed source and away from any obstructions
- Stay with the horse to keep it from injuring itself
- Call your veterinarian for advice about walking the horse and administering pain-relieving drugs, if you have them available
- Avoid tranquilizers, unless directed, as these may reduce the horse's blood pressure

Colic is associated with rapid changes in feed, irregular feeding and an inadequate deworming program.

Em 3. LAMENESS

- Decide which leg(s) is lame and severity of lameness
- Examine the lame leg for
 - warm areas
 - areas painful to the touch
 - swelling
 - abnormal movement or position
- Bandage using a thick bandage extending from one joint above the affected area to one joint below
- If no broken bones are present, move the horse where movement can be limited
- If in doubt, leave the horse where it is until help arrives

Lameness can be associated with poor conditioning, injuries that could have been prevented, and inadequate foot care.

Em 4. FOALING

- The average interval between the time that a mare starts to strain and finishes the birth process is 11 minutes
 - Straining more than 30 minutes without delivery is a problem
- Immediately call your veterinarian
- Walk the mare (to prevent pushing) until the veterinarian arrives

- If your veterinarian instructs you to do a vaginal exam on the mare
 - Get the mare's tail out of the way
 - Wash and dry the rear of the mare thoroughly before entering the birth canal
 - Use an arm length plastic sleeve and lots of lubricant

Call your veterinarian if the problem is sudden, severe, if you are not sure what the problem is, or how to treat it. Emergency medical situations are a part of horse ownership. Sensible emergency care can prevent worsening, reduce discomfort, and promote more rapid correction of the problem. If you have a lot of horse emergencies, you should evaluate your management and make changes to reduce problems.