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EXTRA

PREPARING FOR

**HORSE
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EMERGENCIES

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Don't wait until your horses are having a health emergency to get organized! Prepare for a crisis by putting together a well-stocked first aid kit complete with important documents and phone numbers.

Preparing for Horse Health Emergencies

When dealing with an equine health emergency, the last thing you want is to be scrambling for documents and first-aid materials. Here's how to prepare.

By Nancy S. Loving, DVM

When everything seems to be going just right with your horses, it's difficult to envision being in an emergency situation. But the old Aesop's fable of the grasshopper and the ant reminds us that it is sometimes important to focus on work and planning and not just play, and that includes preparing for emergencies that might arise with the horses in your care.

There are a plethora of horse emergencies to consider, but to start, let's look at putting together an emergency plan and a kit that covers a great number of problems.

First, there are several important documents and instructions to leave handy in the event you aren't home and someone

else has to manage your horse's care during an emergency. Even when you are available, it is smart to have a full set of documents outlining your decisions made in calmer times.

- In advance, write out, sign and date a document that authorizes your veterinarian and/or a referral veterinary hospital to care for your horse's medical or surgical problem. State the amount you will spend and under what conditions (for example, continued soundness following healing versus life-saving measures but no longer rideable). Authorize euthanasia if that is the only humane option and/or medical care exceeds your budget. Leave multiple contact numbers where you can

be reached for discussion about your horse's situation.

- List contact information for at least one or two people who are willing to step in for you if you are unavailable. Provide the caretaker with phone numbers for your veterinarian, an emergency veterinary hospital, a farrier, a local emergency response team and/or fire department, and the human hospital in case of human injury.
- Leave credit card (an active account) information with whoever will be caring for your horse and/or with your veterinarian. Many clinics, especially referral hospitals, require a down payment to permit horse entry into the facility.



Who to call? When leaving your horses in someone else's care, provide them with phone numbers for your veterinarian, an emergency veterinary hospital, a farrier, a local emergency response team, and the human hospital in case of human injury.

- Keep your horse's insurance information accessible with this paperwork. In many cases, the insurance company must authorize treatment before it happens—otherwise, they may not pay the claim.
- Keep a record of your horse's vaccinations, wellness care and other important medical facts with all these documents so there is no delay in treatment and so procedures won't be duplicated by the care facility.
- Have a trailer accessible or arrange for one in advance of the need to transport your horse to a referral clinic.

Once you have those documents in an easily accessible place and you have notified your caretaker and veterinarian where to find them, now you can concentrate on putting together an emergency kit.

The Essential Emergency Kit

Be sure to store all supplies completely out of reach of children, pets and other animals, and in as temperature-controlled an environment as possible. It works well to use a large Tupperware-type container to hold many of the supplies.

Keep a list of what's inside the container and make notes on what needs to be replaced when used. Also, make a note of expiration dates on drugs in the container

so they can be replaced as needed.

Here are some essentials to have on hand:

- Rectal thermometer – for horses, this is usually 5 inches and you can use either glass with mercury or a digital unit. Fit it with a string and alligator clip to attach to the horse's tail. It is important to get a rectal temperature for a horse that is off feed, has a snotty nose, cough, and/or colic, and in instances of potential heat stress.
- Stethoscope – useful to count heart rate and listen to intestinal sounds.
- Needles and syringes for injectable medications.
- Lip chain or twitch – consult with your veterinarian to show you proper and safe use and to determine which form your horse best accepts as a restraint.
- Hoof tools – hoof pick, rasp or file and pliers to remove a horseshoe. Have your farrier show you the best technique to pull a shoe to prevent tearing away of hoof wall. Once nail heads are rasped away, pull the shoe inward toward the sole in small segments starting at the heels and alternating sides as you progress.
- Pocket-sized equine first-aid manual.

Wound Care

Cleanse a wound with cold running water to assess its extent, and to keep injured tissue supple and moist while waiting for your vet. Some horses won't allow cold hosing, and in some cases, it is counter-productive to immerse a wound in water. Clean the wound as best as possible (only if safe to work on the horse) using salt water (1/2 tablespoon salt per quart of water) and antiseptic scrub (povidone-iodine or chlorhexidine). Rinse the soap away completely, dry, then apply topical ointment and a bandage.

Bandaging technique is important to prevent pressure sores or blood or tendon constriction on lower legs. Use firm, even pressure, and pull the bandage towards you across the cannon bone and then lay it down evenly along the tendons coursing down the back of the leg; don't pull as you wrap over the tendons. A snug but not too tight fit is good. A bandage that is too loose can slip down and potentially tighten over a larger structure on the limb or tangle in a horse's legs—none of these are good scenarios.

What you'll want on hand to deal with a wound:

- Antiseptic solution such as povidone-iodine (PI) or chlorhexidine (CH): 10 ml PI or 20 ml CH per liter of water.
- Gauze sponges (3x3) to scrub a wound.
- Disposable surgical gloves to prevent contamination while handling a wound.
- Water-soluble topical antiseptic wound dressing. For example, silver sulfadiazine cream or triple antibiotic ointment.
- Non-stick wound dressing, like a Telfa pad.
- Combine pad, gamgee, roll or sheet cotton, sanitary napkin or disposable diaper for padding the lower limb to offset bandage pressure on tendons and soft tissues.
- Bandaging tape such as Elastikon or Elastoplast bandage—3-inch or 4-inch. Note that Vetrap or CoFlex should only be used with sufficient padding on the limb as it tends to constrict tissues if placed directly on them.
- Diaper rash ointment (Desitin) for girth galls or overreach injuries of the heel bulbs.
- Petroleum-based ointment to place on the skin below a wound to limit skin scald from a wound that drains, or use it



Some situations require immediate veterinary attention. Your role is to help keep your horse quiet and calm while awaiting professional help. Your vet can provide you with immediate tasks that may help your horse until professional care arrives.

- to lubricate the end of a thermometer.
- Broad-spectrum antibiotics – enough to tide you over until your veterinarian can address the wound. Have your vet provide you with specific instructions for their use, and only use when appropriate.
- Bandage scissors with blunt ends.
- Hemostat to clamp a bleeding vessel only if you are comfortable doing that and only if your horse allows you to safely achieve this objective. Otherwise, place a pressure bandage over the bleeding wound until a vet can arrive. Refrain from checking constantly – it takes at least 12 minutes for blood to clot.
- Fly repellent to keep a horse comfortable and to keep insects away from an open wound. Don't apply directly on a wound, just around it. It may work best to spray a cloth and wipe it on.

Medications for Eye Injuries, Wounds, Soft Tissue Injury, or Colic

Learn to evaluate your horse's vital signs under normal circumstances so you can compare normal values to findings during an abnormal health crisis. For a horse that shows colic pain or illness, obtain rectal temperature, pulse and respiration rate, mucous membrane color and refill time. A pink color of the membranes (like that seen beneath your fingernail) has a better prognosis than a pale or muddy hue. The

heart rate (or pulse), mucous membrane parameters, and rectal temperature yield important information to convey to your veterinarian. A stethoscope lets you assess quantity and quality of gut sounds in both flanks.

- An oral gel sedative (DormosedanR gel placed under the tongue) both sedates and curtails pain. Only administer after speaking with your veterinarian.
- Flunixin meglumine (BanamineR) – Use as small an oral dose as possible in the event of colic, administering no more than ½ of label recommendations. Always consult your veterinarian before administering, as dehydration and/or poor intestinal motility can complicate other problems when this is given orally.
- Other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like phenylbutazone, firocoxib, or ketoprofen are useful to manage pain and swelling, and to combat fever. Again, consult your veterinarian when possible before giving NSAIDs to your horse.
- To rinse debris from an injured eye, use sterile saline eyewash solution available at the drug store.
- A sterile ophthalmic ointment without corticosteroid can be used to medicate an eye until it is examined by your veterinarian. If there is corneal ulceration, ointment that contains corticosteroids (often the drug name ends in “-one”) can

worsen an ulcer and adversely complicate healing.

- To keep dirt, insects and bright light away from an eye injury, use a fly mask. Check beneath it twice a day, especially if your horse is rubbing the eye.
- Add electrolytes to drinking water if your horse will drink, and especially following lengthy exertion in hot weather.
- Chemical ice pack – creates instant cold by pinching the catalyst and controls inflammation for a soft tissue injury.

Difficult Emergency Situations

Some situations require immediate veterinarian attention, procedures and specific drugs and/or intravenous fluids to deal with the crisis: choke, hemorrhage, nail puncture in the foot, fracture, tying up/ myositis, lameness and foaling problems, to name a few. But, in all these instances, your role is to help keep your horse quiet and calm while awaiting professional help. Your vet can provide you with some immediate tasks that may help your horse until professional care arrives.

The Bottom Line

It helps to be prepared and to keep a cool head and calm demeanor when faced with an equine emergency. Gather information—vital signs and wound extent, for example—to assess the scope of your horse's crisis. Then call your veterinarian with that information and ask for advice on what to do while awaiting your vet's arrival. The best advice is to be cautious about the temptation to use friends, farriers, Dr. Google and/or other non-veterinary sources for diagnostic and therapeutic recommendations. Always contact your equine veterinarian whenever possible. Your vet can guide you with professional advice and arrange to come see your horse either urgently or as a less urgent appointment.

A well-constructed first aid kit and basic knowledge of how to handle the first stages of an emergency can go a long way in helping you deal with a crisis. The objective is to prevent further damage while also easing a horse's discomfort and distress until veterinary help arrives. **SM**



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