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## EMERGENCY CARE & FIRST AID

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Owning a horse or other pet can be fun and rewarding. However it also comes with obligations that we often fail to recognize until that dreadful moment when we realize our animal is injured or ill. The general nature and design of the horse makes him prone to injury. Traits such as his instinctive flight or fight response, his need to establish a pecking order within a herd, and his natural curiosity served his ancestors well, but often puts today's domesticated horse at risk. Other emergencies include colic, foaling difficulties, acute lameness, seizures, high fevers, and eye problems.

This article will focus on emergency wound care. First it is important to know what is normal for your horse, as there are normal variations in each individual's temperature, pulse and respiration. Learn what is considered a normal range by consulting your veterinarian or an equine reference book.

It is often helpful to have prepared an action plan in case of an emergency. Keep your veterinarian's number by the phone. If your horse is boarded, make sure the stable owner keeps a record of whom to call in case of an emergency. Also, prepare a first aid kit and keep it in the barn and take it with you when trailering your horse.

There are several ways to prepare a first aid kit. It can be elaborate or simple. Here is a short list to get you started: plastic or stainless steel bucket, cotton roll, contact bandage, cling wrap or brown gauze, adhesive wrap or adhesive tape (vet wrap or elasticon), leg wraps (sheet cotton or quilt bandages), sharp scissors, hemostats, rectal thermometer with string and clip attached, surgical scrub and antiseptic solution, latex gloves, flashlight and spare batteries, pliers, 6" diameter PVC tubing cut in half the long way into lengths of 18 – 24 inches (for emergency splinting.) It is always helpful to have some type of anti-inflammatory available for pain, heat, swelling, lameness or fevers. However, if unsure of usage or dose, it is always safer to check with your veterinarian first. She or he can work out a dosage and decide the type of anti-inflammatory that is safest for your animal, as well as inform you of the possible side effects prior to dispensing medication.

The sight of your horse's injury may be unnerving, but if you can stay calm and maintain the presence of mind to call for help as soon as possible, your initial steps may prevent further injury to your horse and quite possibly save its life. The initial steps you take will depend upon each individual circumstance. The following may be used as guidelines:

- 1) Catch and calm the horse to prevent further injury. Move the horse to a stall or other familiar surroundings if possible.
- 2) Get help before trying to treat or evaluate a wound. A normally quiet and calm horse can react quite differently when hurt and in pain. If you get injured you will not be able to help your horse.
- 3) Evaluate the location, depth, and severity of the wound. Remember to do so cautiously so as not to become injured yourself, or to cause further damage or stress to your horse. Here are a few examples of situations when your veterinarian should be called:
  - The bleeding appears excessive.
  - The entire skin thickness has been penetrated.

- The wound appears over or very near a joint.
  - The structures lying under the skin are clearly visible.
  - A puncture has occurred. Nail punctures to the bottom of the foot, especially into the frog can appear deceptively innocuous, but can be very serious and should be seen by your veterinarian.
  - The wound is severely contaminated with dirt, manure, etc.
  - Any large swelling on the lower limb associated with severe lameness or pain (the skin doesn't have to be compromised to have bone or tendon injuries).
  - Any trauma or injury to the eye. It is extremely important to act quickly in this instance by contacting your veterinarian immediately. You may be saving your horse's sight.
- 4) Consult with your veterinarian prior to attempting to remove penetrating objects, as you may precipitate excessive bleeding or cause further damage. A compress or cold water may be applied to the wound.
  - 5) Attempt to stop bleeding by covering the wound with a sterile (if possible) absorbent pad, applying firm, steady pressure to the wound.
  - 6) Do not medicate or tranquilize the horse unless specifically directed by your veterinarian. If the horse has suffered a large blood loss or shock, administration of certain drugs can be life threatening.
  - 7) Prior to removing a sharp object, attempt to consult your veterinarian. She or he will want to know the exact location and depth of penetration. You may want to mark the area, apply antiseptic, and bandage to prevent further contamination.

This is just a short review of procedures for a few emergencies. Prevention is always the best strategy. Assess your horse's environment and remove potential hazards, re-evaluate your management routines, and mentally rehearse your emergency action plan.

*Excerpted from AAEP Emergency Care*