

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



BASIC EQUINE FIRST AID



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Whether at grass, in the stable or while being ridden, horses seem prone to inadvertent injury. Despite the safest of environments, even the most careful owner can end up having to attend to an equine emergency or administer basic first-aid. Everyday cuts and grazes need proper treatment as soon as possible to prevent them from getting worse. The horse keeper must, therefore, be well prepared.



All horses should be checked thoroughly for signs of injury as part of the daily care routine, to ensure injuries are identified and professional veterinary care received.

Be prepared

A simple first-aid kit, kept in the tack room or stable yard, is a necessity for every horse keeper. A few essential items stored safely in a clean, dry box, can save a lot of panic if an equine emergency occurs. The box should be labelled clearly and should include contact numbers for your veterinary surgeons. Any used or expired items should be replaced immediately.

An equine first-aid kit should also be part of the equipment that is taken to shows or whilst travelling. Carrying a separate human first-aid kit is also advantageous.

First-Aid Action

The aim of first-aid is to take immediate action when an injury is discovered, to prevent the condition getting worse while awaiting veterinary assistance.

- Prevent further injury by taking charge of the horse and guiding them to a place of safety.
- Briefly assess any injury and be ready to relay details to the veterinary surgeon.
- Call the veterinary surgeon and act on the advice received from them.
- Identify the cause of the injury and take measures to prevent it happening again.
- If in doubt, always call the vet



A call to the veterinary surgeon might not necessarily result in a visit. Advice given over the telephone can provide reassurance to the keeper and ensure that correct first-aid treatment is given. Calling the veterinary surgeon early is essential. It is a false economy to seek professional advice only when symptoms have worsened considerably. It may cause additional suffering to the animal if attempts are made to treat an injury without due consultation, or if the severity of the injury is underestimated.

Assessing wounds

Cuts and grazes are the most common injuries that are likely to need attention – to stop bleeding and to prevent infection. The type and location of a wound, and the manner in which it was caused, can affect its severity and treatment. It is important to assess the wound quickly and to contact a veterinary surgeon in all cases other than very minor cuts and scrapes.

Veterinary attention is always advisable and is essential if:

- the horse keeper is in doubt or lacks experience to assess and treat minor wounds
- the wound is more than skin deep or more than a few centimetres long
- there is a lot of bleeding or the injury involves the eyes or joints
- the wound is very dirty and/or difficult to assess
- the horse is lame and/or other underlying or internal injury is suspected
- the horse has not been vaccinated against tetanus.

Types of wounds

Clean-cut (incised) – caused by something sharp. This can be serious as there is often a lot of bleeding. The edges of the wound appear clean and straight and the wound can be a lot deeper into the tissue than may first appear.

Torn (lacerated) – caused by something hard but blunt, for example barbed wire. The edges of the wound are irregular and jagged, although bleeding is not usually as profuse as for clean-cut wounds. There may be associated swelling.

Puncture – caused by a piercing object, such as a nail or thorn. These wounds can be far deeper than the external wound suggests and they pose a considerable risk of infection. They are also more easily overlooked.

Grazes (abrasions) – may appear superficial but have a large surface area that poses an increased risk of infection. There is often associated bruising and they can take a long time to heal.

Bruises, lumps, swellings and inflammation (even in the absence of an obvious wound) – can be evidence of an underlying injury, and veterinary advice should be sought.

Types of treatment

The aims of treatment of wounds are to:

- stop bleeding
- cleanse and prevent infection
- promote healing (as quickly and effectively as possible).

Inflammation and swelling can be reduced by addressing their cause and by applying cooling treatments. All treatments should be carried out in accordance with veterinary advice.

Bathing

Use a clean swab with warm water (containing a small amount of a suitable cleanser or antiseptic) to gently cleanse a wound. If several swabs are required, each should be used once and then discarded.

Cold hosing

Apply a steady stream of cold water, washed (for approximately 15 minutes at a time) over an injury, to sooth and reduce swelling.

Poulticing

Apply a poultice (hot or cold) to aid treatment. Cold poultices are used to reduce inflammation caused by kicks or knocks. Hot (but comfortable to the touch) poultices are used to increase blood supply to the injury and to help to draw out any infection that may be present.



Types of bandages and padding

Surgical or self-fixing disposable bandages are useful items in the first-aid box. They are flexible and can be applied easily to provide support or hold dressings in place on the legs and even on areas (such as joints and hooves) that are more difficult to bandage.

In addition to bandaging the lame limb, an exercise or stable bandage is often applied to the opposing, weight-bearing leg, to provide additional support.

Padding is essential beneath all bandages, to even out and reduce pressure and to provide protection. Gamgee, fibregee and leg wraps are all acceptable forms of protection for use under bandages.

Bandaging cautions

Bandages must be fitted correctly, to avoid causing permanent damage. They must be applied over the padding, with an even pressure used throughout. There should be no wrinkles in either the bandage or the padding. Care also needs to be taken when finishing the bandage so that it fastens on the outer side of the leg, with the fastening being secure but no tighter than the bandage itself.

Bandages that are either too tight or are left on too long (or where insufficient padding has been used) can cause permanent hair loss or white hairs on the legs. Furthermore, secondary injury to the tendons can occur if bandages or their ties are too tight or if pressure points are caused (from a twist in the bandage or a knot positioned at the back of the leg). Inflammation and bruising of the cannon bone can also result. Loose or poorly applied bandages can be dangerous and cause problems if they slip down.

When removing bandages the horse's leg should be rubbed to encourage circulation.



Taking a horse's temperature and pulse

A horse's normal temperature is 38°C, though this may vary by half a degree either way. The horse's temperature is taken using an equine thermometer (modern digital versions are preferable to mercury-based ones). Care must be taken when performing this procedure. Ideally, the horse should be held by an assistant. After being lubricated, the thermometer should be partially inserted into the horse's rectum and tilted slightly so that it rests against the rectal wall. The thermometer should be held in place for a full minute before being removed and wiped clean. The reading may then be viewed.

The pulse rate of a horse at rest is 30 to 40 heartbeats per minute. This rate increases normally with exercise and excitement, but can also increase when the horse has a fever or is in acute pain. Likewise, the horse's normal breathing rate can also alter, or appear laboured, indicating possible ill health or distress.

The pulse can be taken at the point where the facial artery passes under the lower jaw. When the artery has been located, light pressure should be applied, using the flat of two or three fingers. The number of pulses over a period of 15 seconds should be counted, then this number multiplied by four to obtain the pulse rate. If the horse shows signs of a fever or appears to be in pain, a veterinary surgeon should be consulted.

It is worth practising taking a horse's pulse before the actual need arises.



Nursing a sick or injured horse

The advice of your veterinary surgeon should be followed in respect of treatment and care during recovery. Additionally, the veterinary surgeon should be contacted if there is any worsening of the horse's condition.

A sick or injured horse which is being kept confined to its stable (referred to as box rest) needs additional care and attention to ensure wellbeing and aid recovery. If a horse is ill, it is more important than ever to observe the animal regularly and to ensure that your horse is comfortable and that the environment is clean.

Effective ventilation of the stable is essential and a light-weight rug can help keep a convalescing horse warm.

Clean fresh water must be available at all times. If water intake has to be monitored, buckets should be used rather than automatic drinkers.

An infectious horse should be kept in isolation. All equipment associated with the horse should be kept separate from that of other horses, and disinfected thoroughly when the horse has recovered. Handlers should adopt strict hygiene measures to prevent the spread of infection.



Feed should be tempting and palatable to encourage a sick horse to eat. Good clean hay should form the basis of the ration and this may require soaking prior to being fed, to increase its palatability and minimise dust. The veterinary surgeon may advise a special diet if the horse has a digestive problem or a nutrition-related condition. A horse that was in regular work prior to injury should be given a reduced feed ration to take account of the decrease in activity level.

The horse's feet should be picked out twice daily and, depending on the nature of the injury, the horse may benefit from being groomed regularly.

Boredom can be alleviated by subdividing the hay ration into several small feeds given throughout the day. If necessary, stable toys or a neighbouring companion horse can be introduced.



Related Blue Cross publications

The following leaflets from the *All About Pets* series may be useful.

- *Safety around horses (H2)*
- *Routine healthcare (H8)*
- *Feeding and watering (H7)*
- *Vaccinations and disease control (H10)*
- *Common ailments (H12)*



All About Pets

The national pet care information service

All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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