

Working Safely Around Horses



Approximately 9.2 million horses are owned by around 2 million people in the U.S. (AHC 2005). Many of these horses weigh around 1,000 pounds and are very fast and powerful (the American Quarter Horse Association alone has more than 3 million registered horses). The size and strength of these animals, along with the large number of people who ride and handle them, make safe horse management vital.

Becoming educated on the potential hazards of working around horses is the first step in limiting your level of risk and potential injury. Risk is involved with almost anything we do: showing cattle, playing sports, driving a car, or riding in an airplane. However, understanding the risks and limitations of our abilities can prevent needless injury.

The following are guidelines for all who participate in horse-related activities, whether you are a beginner or have been working with horses all your life. Many times, injuries happen to a person who feels comfortable around horses and has a momentary lapse in judgment.

When Working from the Ground

Leading

Always lead horses with your hand firmly around the lead rope close to the halter. In this way, you can manipulate the horse's head and keep the animal at a safe distance. Don't lead a horse by the halter alone. Also, when using a lead rope, don't coil the end around the hand (Figure 1).

Turning Out

Many horses tend to run and play when they are turned out, especially if they have been stalled for a time. Always lead a horse into an area and turn it around so that it is facing toward the in-gate and you are between the two. In this way, if the horse decides to run and/or kick, it will have to turn around 180 degrees to do so, thus giving you time to move away. Horses that are led into a pen and immediately turned loose can then run by you and put you in harm's way.



Figure 1

Tying

Tie the horse in a manner that prevents it from getting loose but also allows you to quickly untie it in an emergency. Using a quick-release knot will ensure both needs. Additionally, only tie to a sturdy object so that if the horse startles and sets back, the object will not come loose (in other words, don't tie to stall fronts, loose panels, flimsy poles, or wire fences). It is also important to tie the horse at the proper height and length. Tie at eye level of the horse with no more than about an arm's length of loose rope.



Figure 2

Grooming

When grooming a horse, keep your free hand on the animal at all times. If the horse startles and moves into you, this precaution will give you a leverage point to safely push yourself out of the way (Figure 2). When moving around the horse, always talk to it to alert it to your location. Move around the horse at a distance that will prevent you from being kicked. When picking up the horse's feet, keep your body close to the animal to prevent it from kicking you (Figure 3).

Attire

Wearing the proper shoes when leading and handling horses is essential. Never wear open-toed shoes, tennis shoes, or other shoes of soft material. Boots with firm leather are a must, as horses can quickly and easily step on your foot accidentally or after being startled.

Feeding

If you allow the horse to come to the feed bucket while you are putting feed in the container, the animal could inadvertently injure you. Requiring the horse to stay at a distance until all feed is in its proper place will limit this risk. Also, feeding treats from your hand is a bad idea. Horses become used to these treats and will start to bite at or nibble on people in anticipation of treats.

When Riding

Tack and Equipment

Although tack and riding equipment can be pricey, most of the time you get what you pay for. Saddles that not only fit the horse well, but also are made of quality leather are usually more expensive than poorly made saddles. However, quality leather is less likely to crack or break. Additionally, it is imperative to clean and oil tack and equipment to keep it in its most functional condition.

Attire

Never wear shorts and tennis shoes when riding horses. Proper riding attire includes jeans and boots with pronounced heels. Heeled boots prevent your foot from going through the stirrup and becoming entangled around your ankle. Jeans prevent injury to your legs. It is a good idea to wear a properly fitted helmet certified by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM). Not wearing a helmet or wearing one that fits improperly is associated with most head injuries (Watt and Finch 1996). Helmets not only protect your head from a fall but also help absorb energy to reduce injury to the skull or brain (HorseQuest.com 1999).

Saddling and Unsaddling

Be aware of cinches or bridles that pinch. Ill-fitting or poorly designed equipment may cause the horse to act inappropriately. Experts recommend that "fresh" horses be tacked up and lunged to allow them to release stored energy. If you are using a back cinch, fasten it last when putting on the saddle and unfasten it first when taking the saddle off.



Figure 3

Bridling and Unbridling

Putting a bit in or taking one out of the horse's mouth can put you in a precarious position. The safest way to bridle or unbridle a horse is to stand close to its face, next to its throatlatch. Slowly introduce the bit to the horse's mouth. Most importantly, when you take the bit out, make sure to do it slowly so that the horse voluntarily drops it. Yanking out the bit may alarm the horse and cause the animal to run backwards or bump into you. Additionally, always keep your mouth and lips closed to protect your teeth if the horse reacts and bumps your face.

Mounting

When mounting a horse, always keep the reins in your left hand. If the horse spooks while you're mounting it, you will want to have control of its face. Once mounted, always make your horse stand still for 15–20 seconds before riding off. This step will prevent the horse from taking off while being mounted. Lastly, it is imperative for you to keep your feet in the stirrups and your legs around the horse at all times.

Paying Attention

Whenever you're handling a horse, whether mounted or not, you should always stay alert to your surroundings. Watching for children, loose dogs, or debris that could startle the horse is very important. Supervision of riders is important in the prevention of injury. Unsupervised riders may have the greatest risk of injury (Watt and Finch 1996). Supervision may be especially needed for riders aged 10–19, as injuries occur most frequently in this age group (Watt and Finch 1996).

Confidence and Calmness

Remaining confident and calm when working around horses is vital in limiting potential injury, as well. Becoming frightened can cause the horse to startle worse. Being firm, confident, and smart are all essential aspects of limiting potential injury and maximizing the enjoyment that comes with working with horses.

Citations

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