



Basic Horse Handling Practices for First Responders

A tip sheet for basic safe handling practices of horses for first responders

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Background: Responding to an accident involving horses

According to a survey conducted by the American Horse Council in 2017, Michigan ranks 12th in the United States for horse population. Therefore, it's common to see horse trailers traveling the roads and highways throughout Michigan increasing the risk of a horse related emergency. Horses may also escape their property and become a hazard to drivers or be involved in a riding accident along the road.

When responding to an accident involving horses, realize that this situation may vary dramatically compared to other livestock accidents. Animal behavior, in addition to the total investment that horse owners have in their animals is complex and includes considerations like the owner's emotional attachment, monetary investment and competitive goals associated with their horse. A horse can live for 25 plus years and, in many cases, may be owned by the same family for much of that time. Keeping these factors in mind may help to minimize some of the chaos around the accident scene.

Tips for Safe Horse Handling: Keeping it safe for you and the horse

1. DO NOT become complacent when handling a horse

- Horses often react quickly to what they perceive as danger. As a prey animal, a horse's natural instinct will be to run from danger.
- Horses can and will bolt or run away, bite, kick and strike with their legs; horses react quickly giving the handler little time to react. It is important for the handler to keep the attention of the horse, avoiding other potential distractions that may cause a negative reaction to a respective situation.
- Do not assume all horses like one another; there is a social hierarchy within a horse herd

2. Basic horse terminology: gender and age

- Stallion: an intact adult male; can be aggressive so handle with caution
- Colt: a young male that has not been castrated
- Gelding: a castrated adult male
- Mare: an adult female
- Filly: a young female
- Foal: male or female under the age of one year
- Weanling: a foal that has been weaned (separated from their dam/mother)
- Yearling: a male or female between 1 and 2 years of age

Reminders: 1) A young horse usually takes more skill to handle than an aged horse that has more training and experience. 2) Horses may exhibit sexual behavior when housed together and can breed, even if they are related. 3) Mares may be more excitable when they are in heat (cycling). 4) A young foal will usually stay close to their mother, even without a halter and lead. 5) Mares and their foals should be kept together if possible. 6) Stallions should be kept separate from other horses to limit sexual or aggressive behaviors of any kind.

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3. Reading the horse's body language: body language is a good indicator of the horse's overall attitude

- **Ears pinned back:** may signal agitation, aggression, fright or impending flight response
- **Eyes:** eyes opened widely, showing white around the eyes indicates a horse is angry or scared
- **Tail:** held high means they are alert and/or excited; held low means submission or exhaustion; "snapping" or "ringing" the tail means they are agitated
- **Legs:** pawing indicates frustration; stomping indicates mild protest or threat; leg lifted shows a defensive threat or possible leg injury

4. Approaching a horse

- Approach in a calm and confident manner
- Approach a horse at an angle toward the horse's shoulder
- Horses cannot see directly in front or directly behind them
- NEVER approach a horse by running, yelling or clapping
- Horses may be familiar with the verbal command "Whoa" as a signal to stand still

5. The 3 Cs of handling: **Calm, Confident and Consistent**

- Stay **Calm:** VERY IMPORTANT to keep your emotions in check; keep your voice low and slow
- Be **Confident:** horses can sense if you feel uncomfortable and/or anxious; approach them in a smooth manner keeping eye contact and using soothing verbal commands like, "Whoa" or "Easy"
- Remain **Consistent:** be fair and consistent; keep horses out of your personal space; if they lean or step on you, correct them with a quick snap on the lead rope and slap on their shoulder

6. Leading a horse

- Safest way to lead a horse is with a halter and lead rope
- Safest place to stand is slightly forward of the horse's LEFT shoulder
- If you must tie the horse by the lead rope, only tie to a strong and secure object - NEVER tie to any part of a vehicle. Do tie lead at horse's eye level, tie the rope 18 inches long, using a quick release knot

7. Working around a horse

- Always work front to back on the horse, in a slow and steady manner
- If working in tandem, work from the same side of the horse

8. Horse health

- For horse health considerations, consult a veterinarian; an insurance claim may require a veterinarian's consultation before a horse is euthanized

Final Considerations

If possible, allow owners or caretakers to handle their own horses at the accident scene. There are several reasons for this consideration: 1) they will know the horse's personality and level of training, 2) they should have the skill to handle respective horses and 3) it gives the humans involved something to do and may keep both them and their horses calmer. This DOES NOT mean that the horse owner is in charge. First responders have an important job to do and will need cooperation to complete the job safely.

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