

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



SAFETY AROUND HORSES



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Horses and ponies are large, often unpredictable animals. They are beautiful and, at the same time, a potential hazard. All riders and keepers should know how to act to remain safe around horses.



General safety around horses

Safety requires both common sense and an understanding of horses. Horse riding is a high-risk activity, but handling horses from the ground can be just as dangerous for the unwary. Whether a beginner or an experienced horse keeper, safety awareness is vital both on the ground and in the saddle. Additionally, equestrian activities often involve lifting and carrying heavy items. Loads should be broken down to manageable weight loads and safe lifting techniques adopted to prevent back strain.

Clothing and equipment

Sensible clothes should always be worn when dealing with horses. A protective riding hat is essential when riding, and a body protector is highly advisable. These should also be worn when in any risk situation, such as when loading a horse, schooling from the ground or handling an excitable animal. Sturdy boots and gloves should be worn when handling horses and when turning out or bringing in from the pasture. Protective clothing should be fitted correctly and purchased new from a reputable retailer which has up to date product knowledge and fitting skills. When working around horses, the wearing of jewellery should be avoided. Earrings, other piercings and finger rings are easily caught and can either break or cause injury.

Understanding horses

A horse's behaviour should never be taken for granted – even the oldest and quietest horse can behave unpredictably at times. A horse's natural instinct dictates either “fight or flight” as a defence reaction if feeling threatened.

When around horses, the following should be remembered:

- Be confident – a horse takes confidence from a confident handler
- Set fair and realistic ground rules and stick to them consistently
- Be alert and plan ahead – consider how your horse is likely to react, and take positive action before your horse becomes alarmed
- Seek help and guidance – there is always something new to learn about horses, so do not cope alone
- Think “prevention” – complacency causes accidents so don't take unnecessary risks
- Be insured – public liability insurance is essential for all horse owners, keepers or riders for claims that may be made against them in the event of an accident



On the yard

On all yards, human and equine first aid kits should be readily available and someone on the yard should be qualified in first aid practises. All keepers and visitors should be familiar with accident procedures and know what action to take in the event of an emergency.

Understanding prevention and how to minimise the risk of accidents is essential, and best practice should be the norm. Safety procedures and a list of emergency contact numbers should be displayed prominently on the yard and programmed into the mobile phones of riders in case of accidents when out riding. An emergency list should include details of the yard manager, a veterinary surgeon, doctor, farrier, the local police and the fire brigade.

Main yard gates should be kept closed at all times to reduce the risk of a loose horse escaping onto the road. Stable doors should be fastened securely with horse-proof locks and areas to which horses have access should be free from obstructions and any surfaces that may cause an accident or injury.

On the ground

All horses should be taught to understand basic commands and to respond accordingly. They should be taught to stand still and walk clear of the handler when being led from either side. The handler should wear gloves when leading, and lead ropes or lunge lines should not be wrapped around the hand or permitted to trail on the ground.

Horses should be tied up when being groomed or tacked-up, even in a stable. This enables the handler to move quietly and confidently around the horse, without the danger of being trapped in a corner.

When tied, a horse should be wearing a well-fitting head collar, with the lead rope secured through a loop of string attached to the tying-up ring. If a horse panics and pulls back forcefully, the string will break, minimising the chance of the animal slipping over and being injured. A horse should not be tied by any other means. Attaching the rope to the bit or tying the horse by its reins may cause serious injury and long-term fear.

A handler should be aware of the safest position to adopt for the task being carried out. Standing directly behind or in front of a horse can increase the risk of being injured should the horse strike out with a limb. When holding a horse that is being clipped or treated by a veterinary surgeon or farrier, the handler should stand on the same side as the attendant.

When attending to a horse's feet and legs (such as when applying boots or bandages), the handler should squat beside the horse (not sit or kneel), enabling a quick reaction should the need arise.

Care should be taken when lifting a horse's leg. When picking up a hindleg, the handler's arm should rest in front of the animal's cannon bone. If a horse pulls the leg away the handler can take preventive measures and will be less likely to be kicked.

To remove a head collar when turning a horse loose in the field or stable, the horse should first be led into the turn-out area and then turned around to face the door or gate before being released. This will minimise the chances of the handler being trampled or kicked by an excited animal.

Feeding horses in a field or taking a bucket of food to catch a particular horse in an area where several animals are being kept can pose a significant risk of aggression and injury to both horses and handlers.

In the saddle

All tack and riding equipment should be well maintained, correctly fitted and suitable for the purpose. Saddlery should be cleaned and inspected regularly for signs of damage, particularly to straps, stitching, buckles and fasteners.

The equipment should be equally safe and suitable for the rider. In the event of an accident, stirrup irons of an incorrect width can allow a rider's foot to slip through the iron becoming trapped. Special safety stirrup irons are available to reduce this risk.

A rider should be appropriately dressed. The security of the equipment should be checked before mounting and at intervals during a ride. The girth should be comfortable for the horse and fitted securely – an overtightened girth can be as harmful as a loose one.

A rider should never ride any horse which they are unable to control safely. Riding in an enclosed and familiar environment is beneficial for schooling and to enable a new horse and rider to become accustomed to one another.

On the road

Riding on roads demands both common sense and road sense. All road users have a legal duty to care for other road users and should be conversant with the Highway Code. Riders should be appropriately attired and, by law, children under 14 years of age must wear a hat complying with the Horses (Protective Headgear for Young Riders) Regulations 1992.



Riders should be observant and acknowledge careful drivers. Both hands should be kept on the reins, except when signalling changes of direction. Riders should leave at the yard details of their planned route and the time at which they expect to return.

It is advisable to wear fluorescent and reflective gear at all times when riding on roads – this is essential in poor weather. Riding in poor visibility (heavy rain, fog or at dawn and dusk) should be avoided. On a bright, sunny day a horse and rider can be equally difficult to spot, owing to the contrast of light and shade, and the glare and reflection from the sun. Irrespective of conditions, it should never be taken for granted that the driver of an approaching vehicle has seen the horse and rider.

A less experienced horse or rider will benefit from being accompanied by an experienced rider on a sensible horse. A horse known to be dangerous in traffic should not be ridden on the road until appropriately trained in safe surroundings by an experienced trainer.

All riders should pass the British Horse Society Riding and Road Safety test before venturing out on the road.

Action in event of a road accident

In accidents involving cars and horses, it is the horse and rider that invariably come off worse. Riders should know what action to take in the event of an accident and should report accidents and also any near misses to the local police.

If an accident occurs:

- prevent further accidents and risk of injury by warning approaching traffic
- summon professional help and emergency services
- apply basic first-aid (to humans and horses) until help arrives
- inform the police if there are horses loose on the road

Related Blue Cross publications

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

- *Yard safety and security (H3)*
- *Basic equine first aid (H11)*
- *Correctly fitting tack (H16)*

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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