

First Aid for the Horse

PART ONE

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Her clinical interests include diagnostic imaging, the investigation and management of musculoskeletal issues in the equine athlete, the equine foot, neonatology and internal medicine.

If you own horses, at some stage a medical emergency is highly likely. Emergencies with your horse can be frightening and confronting. Being prepared is the key. In this and next month's articles we are going to look at knowing your horse's vital signs, what constitutes a first aid kit and what to do in some of the more common emergencies – colic, wounds and eye issues.

Definition of first aid
First aid is first line or emergency treatment for injury or disease administered before veterinary treatment is available. It does not replace veterinary treatment.

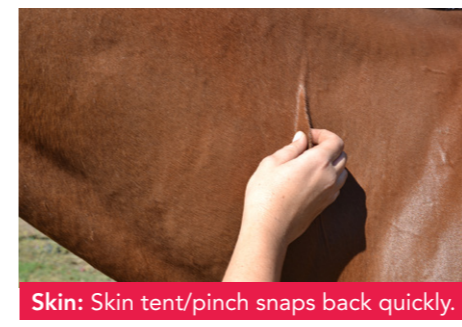
Why are horses so vulnerable to emergencies?
There are several reasons why horses get themselves into emergency states—they have an instinctive flight versus fight response, a dynamic herd hierarchy, a tendency to make sudden movements when startled, we keep them in and compete them in different environments, they are travelled, they are prone to colic, and quite frankly they are accident prone!

The healthy horse – what is normal?
In many conditions, such as colic and wounds, it is obvious there is a problem with your horse. In some cases the signs can be more subtle, so it is important to know the normal vital signs of a horse and their normal behaviour.



- THE HEALTHY HORSE**
- Bright, alert and responsive (BAR)
 - Healthy appearance – good body condition, glossy coat, clear eye etc
 - No discharges from eyes or nose
 - Stands evenly – all four feet on ground
 - No lameness
 - Cool limbs with no unusual swellings
 - No signs of sweating at rest
 - Eating and drinking normally
 - Normal faeces and urine

VITAL SIGNS



NORMAL VITAL SIGNS

TEMPERATURE
37.5 – 38.5°C

RESPIRATORY RATE
8 – 20 BPM

HEART RATE
30 – 44 bpm

Prepare for an emergency – have an action plan!

- Be prepared for an emergency before it occurs – this will help keep you calm.
- Have the following ready:**
- Veterinarian's emergency contact details
 - Back up veterinarian
 - in case the regular one can't be reached or can't attend
 - Contact details of friends and neighbours
 - provide help whilst waiting for the vet

- Address of the location of the horse
 - Include key landmarks
 - Helps the vet locate you rapidly
- Transport or numbers of people that can transport
 - In case the horse needs to be transported to a hospital or veterinarian
- First aid kits
 - At stables
 - When travelling

Initial response to an emergency

- Try and keep calm – this will help the horse stay calm
- Get help and delegate responsibilities
 - Calling the vet
 - Getting first aid kit
 - Holding the horse
- Move the horse to a safe clean place, if possible, to avoid further injury
- Contacting the veterinarian
 - Speak clearly and concisely
 - Don't shout at the veterinarian. You may be in a panic, but shouting and being demanding doesn't help, they are probably dealing with multiple cases and need to triage
 - Give the following details
 - Full name
 - Phone number
 - Location of the horse
 - Be ready to give details of the emergency and details
 - Keep it concise
 - LISTEN carefully and follow the veterinarian's instructions
 - DO NOT administer medications unless instructed to do so by the veterinarian

First aid kit

- These can be simple or elaborate and may contain different items according to your circumstance. It is a good idea to have one at the stables and one in your float for use when travelling.
- The essential items are:**
- Notebook and pen
 - Torch and batteries or headlamp
 - Pliers or wire cutters
 - Thermometer
 - Stethoscope
 - Scissors
 - Antiseptic solution
 - Iodine or chlorhexidine

- Saline
- Gauze swabs
- Antiseptic ointment
- Poultice - Animalintex
- Bandage materials
 - Padding – combined dressing or cotton wool
 - Wound dressings – melolin
 - Gauze wraps
 - Elastoplast and vetwrap
 - Duct tape
 - Cling wrap

It is also a good idea to have PPE (personal protection equipment):

- Disinfectant/antiseptic soap
- Hand sanitisers
- Rubber boots/boot covers
- Face shield
- Eye protection/safety glasses
- Face masks/P2 respirator
- Disposable rubber gloves

What are emergencies that require prompt veterinary attention?

- Heavy bleeding that will not stop
- Obvious bone fractures
- Wounds which penetrate a joint or involve a tendon or ligament
- Wounds which penetrate the abdomen or chest cavities
- Deep wounds (including puncture wounds)
- Injuries that prevent the horse from bearing weight on a limb
- Difficulty breathing
- Choking on feed
- Collapse or loss of balance
- Severe fluid diarrhoea
- Colic with severe and ongoing pain
- Eye injuries

We will look at some of these emergencies in the next part of this article, starting here with colic.

Colic
The subject of colic has been covered in other Horse Deals articles, but here we will give a summary of what it is, what to look out for and what to do.

Colic is **abdominal pain** and is a relatively common emergency seen by horse owners.

There are many different causes of colic:

- Gas/flatulent
- Spasmodic
- Impactions/constipation
- Parasitic

- Enteroliths
- Abscess
- Displacements – the large colon becomes displaced and in an abnormal position
- Peritonitis
- Strangulating – bowel blood supply is affected e.g., twists, lipomas, intussusceptions etc

The majority of colic cases (98%) can be managed by **MEDICAL MANAGEMENT** with pain relief, intravenous or oral fluids and sedatives. Some even get better by themselves. Only a small percent (2 - 5 %) require surgery and your veterinarian will monitor what your horse requires and will refer to a hospital for further investigation and management if required.

What are the signs for colic?

Horses can have one or more of these symptoms, which can vary in presentation from mild to severe:

First aid for colic

- Call the vet
 - Describe the signs
 - Tell them how long the horse has been showing signs of colic
- Lightly walk the horse
 - Only if safe to do so
 - **DO NOT KEEP WALKING AND WALKING!**
 - Walk slowly and for short periods
 - Do not over exert the horse
 - Experienced handler only – not a child
 - If the horse is dangerous to hold, move it to a safe area where it cannot hurt itself and keep away
- No food or drink
 - Do not allow the horse to eat or drink unless instructed by the veterinarian
- No medicine
 - Do not administer medications unless instructed to by the veterinarian
 - When you administer drugs it affects what the veterinarian is able to use

Summary

Due to the nature of the horse and the environment we keep them in, emergencies are inevitable when owning a horse.

Know your horse and what is normal, learn how to look at the vital signs. Be prepared with an action plan and a well-stocked first aid kit. **BE PREPARED** – prior planning and preparation prevents a poor performance!

Next issue we will look at eye emergencies and wounds. 🐾

THE SIGNS OF COLIC



Pawing at ground.



Stretching out.



Sweating.



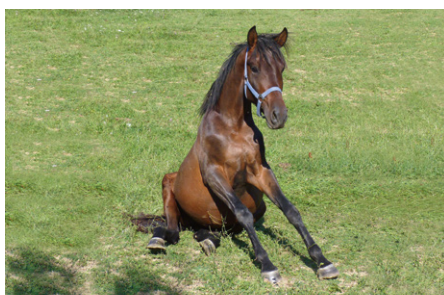
Lip curling.



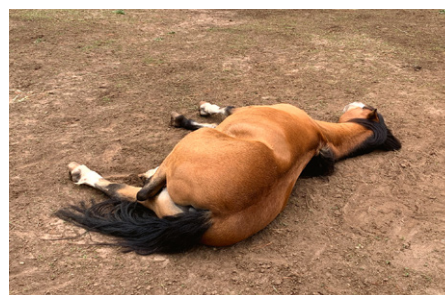
Watching flanks.



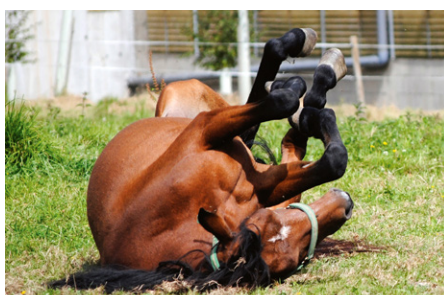
Not passing faeces.



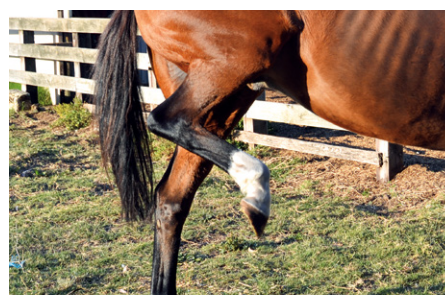
Dog sitting.



Lying down.



Rolling.



Kicking abdomen.

“Be prepared for an emergency before it occurs – this will help keep you calm.”