

SAFETY AROUND HORSES

Due to their size and behavioral nature, horses can significantly injure those around them, both intentionally and unintentionally. Common injuries caused to humans by horses include bites, kicks, strikes, and falls from being run into or knocked down. By their nature, horses are unpredictable, however employing certain core safety practices around them will reduce chances of injury.

Understanding the basics of horse behavior, being familiar with dangerous areas around the horse, knowing how to approach a horse, and utilizing safe handling techniques are key to staying safe.

PRACTICES TO REDUCE INJURIES AROUND HORSES:

Understanding Behavioral Basics

- As prey animals, horses may exhibit “fight or flight” behavior when fearful. Their primary instinct is to run away, and they can have little sense of self-preservation when doing so. This may result in them running into and over people. Understanding their typical behavioral patterns and the postures associated with each is important.
- Be mindful of a horse’s ear position. Ears turned back and laying against their head often means that the horse is displaying aggression.
- Pay attention to sounds that the horse may be making such as vocalization or snorting/ breathing heavily. These are often associated with agitation.
- Approaching multiple horses in an open field, a mother and baby, a horse that is eating, or an in-tact male (stallion) may be situations of increased risk. Be mindful of horses at all times, and particularly in situations where a horse may feel threatened or challenged by your presence.

Stand in Safe Zones

- Horses have blind spots directly in front of their face and directly behind their tail. Avoid standing in these locations in order to increase your visibility to the horse and to minimize chances of strike and kick injuries.
- The horse’s “flanks” are the areas of its stomach just in front of the hind legs on either side of its body. The flanks are a particularly sensitive spot for horses. Avoid touching the flanks if possible. If you must touch the flank area, initiate contact with the horse on another area of its body and then work your hand back to the flank area.
- When reaching under a horse to feel the bottom of the ventral midline, stand by the front leg facing the back of the horse in order to keep your body out of the reach of the hind leg to avoid being kicked.

Approaching a Horse

- Horses are trained to be approached and have halters put on their head from their left side. They also are generally led from their left side.
- Signal your presence when approaching a horse by making a soothing sound. Avoid making a “clicking” sound since it generally signals the horse to move.
- Avoid sudden, fast movements and loud noises such as yelling.
- If the horse tries to move away from you as you approach, pursuing it faster will almost always result in problems. Take time to assess the situation, recruit assistance if needed, and give the horse time to think when approaching it.

Safe Handling Techniques

- Ensure that the halter fits the head snugly and properly by not obstructing the horses' eyes or nasal passages.
- Never wrap the lead rope attached to the halter around your hand or arm and hold the rope at least one foot from its point of attachment to the halter.
- Lead the horse from its left and stand "shoulder to shoulder" so that the horse does not get more than two feet in front of you or two feet behind you.
- Avoid distractions such as using a phone while handling a horse. Be mindful of the environment around you and communicate with others around you if you are concerned about their location and activities relative to the horse.
- Remain on your feet at all times when working with a horse. Never sit or kneel when working near a horse.

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LEARNING QUESTIONS

Q. What are some typical behavioral signs that horses may display when aggressive or fearful?

A. Review some of the basic horse behaviors and situations where aggression may be more likely.

Q. Where are the more dangerous areas to stand around a horse?

A. Identify the areas directly in front and behind the horse and review the location of the flanks.

Q. What are some general rules to follow when approaching a horse?

A. Discuss approaching from the left, announcing your presence by making an appropriate noise, avoiding sudden movements/ loud noises, and measures to take in the event a horse does not want to be caught.

Q. What are some core safe horse handling techniques?

A. Explain how to place and fit a halter on a horse's head, how to hold a rope, and how to lead a horse.

ADDITIONAL TRAINING RESOURCES

University of Kentucky Horse Safety Guide: <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/4af/4af05ma/4af05ma.htm>

American Association of Equine Practitioners Safe Handling of Horses article: <https://thehorse.com/13855/practical-and-safe-horse-handling-3/>

Extension Handling a Horse Safely: <https://articles.extension.org/pages/12198/ground-handling-horses-safely>