

Administering the correct first aid to an equine wound can make a big difference to its long-term outcome. **Julia James**, veterinary surgeon with the Larkmead Veterinary Group, Oxfordshire, offers some advice.

# Dealing with a wound effectively

**W**ounds are something all horse owners will have to deal with at some stage with their horse.

Horses by their very nature can be flighty and excitable, they can kick each other, and can injure themselves while out hacking or competing, or just hurt themselves in their stable or field. Some also seem more accident prone than others.

As vets, wound management is one of the common problems we deal with in an emergency situation. Before we arrive, appropriate first aid, given by owners, can be of great benefit and can affect the management and outcome of the wound.

However distressing it may be to see your horse injured, it is important to remain calm, to stay safe yourself – injured horses may behave unpredictably – and to think clearly before tackling the problem. Never hesitate to contact your vet, preferably sooner rather than later, to assess whether a visit is needed.

Always remember to contact your vet if you are unsure about your horse's tetanus cover. Tetanus is a potentially fatal disease so if there is any doubt about vaccine status, tetanus antitoxin will be needed to be given.

## First aid kit

- A roll of cotton wool
- Sterile non-adhesive wound dressings
- Sterile saline
- Conforming bandages
- Cohesive bandages
- Wound hydrogel
- Clean bucket
- Thermometer
- Scissors
- Mild antiseptic/fly repellent ointment

## Signs a wound needs a vet attention

- Bleeding profusely
  - A full thickness wound through the skin. It may need to be stitched
  - Near a joint or tendon
  - Contaminated with dirt
  - A puncture wound –
- although they look small they can be serious
- Causing the horse lameness, especially if the wound is small
  - If the horse is not up-to-date with tetanus vaccinations

The aim of any first aid is to:

- Protect the horse from further injury.
- Control any bleeding.
- Minimise contamination of the wound.

After an accident occurs, or you discover a wound, if possible try to move your horse to a safe place to prevent any further injury or pain and to allow proper assessment of the damage.

## Control bleeding

Any profuse bleeding should be controlled by applying pressure over the source of the blood. This can be done using a thick pad of clean cloth or dressing held in place manually or bandaged using a cohesive bandage.

Although worrying at the time, it is important to remember horses have a lot of blood (about 50 litres) so although there may look like a lot of blood on the stable floor, blood loss from wounds is fortunately rarely life threatening. Do not apply a tourniquet to control bleeding. This can result in long-term damage.

## Clean the wound

Any wound needs careful cleaning. This will help reduce any contamination and will allow better assessment of the severity of the wound. If the wound is covered in a lot of mud then this is best done using a gently trickling hose, taking care not to force any dirt deeper in to the wound. The cold water also acts to reduce inflammation.

Following this the wound should be flushed, ideally with sterile saline, but cooled boiled water with a small amount of salt added can be used. Avoid using disinfectant-type solutions because these are too strong and will damage the cells required to help with wound healing.

## Apply a dressing

Following flushing, hydrogels can be used in the wound to keep them moist and prevent further contamination. The wound should then be covered by a sterile non-adhesive wound dressing and bandaged in place to keep it clean while waiting for the vet to arrive.

For many wounds which are just superficial scrapes or only partial skin thickness, cleaning them properly and bandaging them may be all the treatment which is required.

## Fly control

It is also important to prevent fly nuisance to any uncovered wounds in summer, with good use of fly repellents on the rest of the horse and use of mild antiseptic ointment or petroleum jelly over the wound.

If you have any concerns about a wound then it is important to call your vet to discuss it with them. They may need to perform a thorough examination of the wound, especially if there is any risk there is penetration into a joint or tendon sheath, as this could be life threatening. In order to do this,



Julia James advises moving your horse to a safe place following the discovery of a wound.

sedation may be required to allow a detailed assessment.

If a wound is fresh and 'clean', then depending on the site, it may be suitable for closing using stitches or staples. Many older or more traumatic wounds have to be allowed to heal by secondary intention, which means they are not stitched.

Different dressings will need to be applied as the wound heals to get the best possible results. Initially these will need changing every two to three days, reducing to every three to five days as the healing process becomes more established.

A good dressing needs to keep the wound slightly moist and the surrounding skin dry. Box rest is often required in order to minimise the amount of movement and to speed up the healing process.

Antibiotic and anti-inflammatory treatment may also be prescribed because these will help in

the treatment and prevention of infection and will keep the horse as comfortable as possible. On occasions where a wound covers a large area, especially on the limbs, then a skin graft may be used to speed the rate of healing.

Any wound which occurs over a joint or tendon/tendon sheath can be very serious as infection or damage to these structures can be life threatening and can cause long-term lameness.

These horses often need prompt and expert management in an equine hospital with the use of x-rays, ultrasound and laboratory testing to assess the full extent of the damage. Treatment often needs to be intensive and ongoing and can be expensive.

One problem which can occur in horses is the production of proud flesh. This occurs when the granulation tissue in the centre of a wound grows more quickly and is not covered and kept in check by the epidermal cells at the edge of

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JULIA JAMES

the wound. The result is a fleshy hard pink lump standing proud of the wound.

Veterinary help will be required to treat this and can take a prolonged period of time.

Finally, it is always good to be prepared by making sure your horse's first aid kit is ready for use.



Any wound needs careful cleaning to reduce contamination.



Keep your horse's first aid kit ready for action.



Some wounds may require closing using stitches.