



Accidents will happen!

Finding a frightened horse in an emergency situation is scary. But armed with the best first-aid knowledge, you'll be ready to deal with anything

Several things about our horses' natures make them prone to getting into scrapes. For one, they are naturally inquisitive, which means they can find themselves in sticky and potentially dangerous situations while exploring something that's caught their interest. Plus, because they are flight animals and easily frightened, their natural instinct to flee a situation at all costs when they're panicked can lead to them doing something dangerous, such as running through fencing or jumping out of stables, in extreme cases.

Thankfully, horses don't get themselves into serious scrapes very often and most wounds are relatively minor, but would you know what to do if you found a horse in a real emergency situation? We went to an XL Equine EquineSkills workshop to learn all about it.

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Safety first

If you find a horse in a dangerous or stressful situation, or in pain, he will act unpredictably. So whatever the scenario, the first thing you must think about is your own safety and that of others around you. It's natural for everyone to want to get stuck in and help the horse, but actually that's probably the worst thing you can do.

There are several cases where people have suffered very serious injuries while trying to help horses in difficulty. Usually, the horse is fine once he has been rescued, but people have been seriously hurt in the process, ending up with injuries such as fractures and brain damage. So make sure you take charge of the situation and ensure the safety of everyone nearby.

For more information

For more information on XL Equine's EquineSkills courses or to book a course, visit xlequine.co.uk

Words: Lucy Turner



East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service have a specially trained animal rescue team



Do whatever's necessary to keep your horse calm until help arrives

Make the call

In an emergency, it's almost definite you're going to need your vet. Even if there aren't any nasty wounds, if your horse has been trapped and has panicked, for example, it's best to get him checked over for any less obvious problems, such as damage to muscles or internal organs. So call your vet immediately.

You also need to consider whether you're going to need the fire brigade to free the horse. If you think you might, get on to them straightaway by calling 999. They have specialised animal rescue units that have had special training in the rescue of horses, and in order to make sure the situation is as stress-free, safe and humane as possible, they always work alongside a vet during a rescue operation. If a vet is not already on their way, they will contact one from a BEVA directory of equine vets and ask them to assist.

If the horse in trouble does not belong to you, and you don't know the owner or are unable to contact the owner, call your own vet and/or the fire brigade if you think you need them.

Know when to intervene

What you do next will very much depend on the situation and the horse involved. Essentially, you want to make sure that the horse is safe from further injury. If it's safe to approach the horse, it might be sensible to quietly and calmly put a headcollar on him to restrain him, and try to calm and soothe him if he's distressed.

However, you'll need to play it by ear a little, watching the horse carefully as you approach him. If he becomes more agitated as you approach, back away and wait for help – your vet will be able to administer a sedative if necessary. It's amazing how many horses will stand really calmly until people start approaching and trying to help. So you need to decide whether to intervene and how much, depending on the horse's level of stress.

Some time ago, Karl Holliman, Equine vet from Cliffe Equine in East Sussex, was called to a trapped horse in distress. The horse had wandered into the feed room, which contained a mechanic's pit that had been covered with pieces of wood. While exploring the feed room, the horse fell through the wood into the pit, landing upright.

He was standing quietly, but while waiting for help, the owners decided to try and put a headcollar on him. The horse began to thrash around as they approached him and he ended up upside down in the ditch, making the rescue much trickier. Luckily, the horse was extracted unharmed, but had they kept back and waited for help, the horse would probably have remained upright and the rescue would have been much easier.





Prioritising patients

If more than one horse is involved in an accident, it can help to perform triage, just like the nurses do in A&E, to decide whether you need to be rushed straight in or can safely wait in the queue. This involves taking a closer look at the injuries and deciding how serious they are, then prioritising which animal needs treating or rescuing first.

However, if it's not safe to get close enough to the horse to be able to do this, it is best to just stand back and wait for the emergency services to arrive. If you are able to get near them safely, never examine a horse on your own – always have someone else to help you hold him. There are three categories of triage...

➤ LIFE-THREATENING

In these cases, the horse could die if he doesn't receive appropriate treatment within the next 20 minutes to an hour. For example, the horse could be suffering significant blood loss (such as a major arterial bleed) or breathing difficulties.

➤ IT'S URGENT

If left much longer than an hour or so, the horse's condition could end up becoming life-threatening. For example, large, deep wounds, wounds to joints and fractures.

➤ IT'S NOT URGENT

Leaving the horse untreated for a few hours isn't going to be detrimental to him. For example, if he has superficial wounds.

Check his vitals

Assuming it's safe enough to assess the horse closely, you could check his airway, breathing and circulation (known as ABC, commonly used in human first aid).

A

AIRWAY

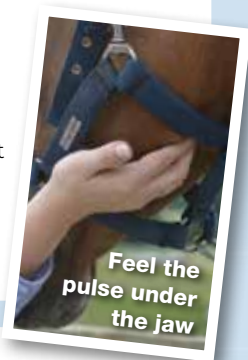
Check the horse's head is straight and that there is nothing blocking his mouth. If there is anything in the way, remove it.

B

BREATHING

Watch the horse's sides or his nostrils to check his breathing – the normal respiratory rate is eight to 12 breaths per minute. In an emergency situation, don't be surprised if the respiratory rate is increased, as this often happens in a response to pain and stress.

If, on the other hand, the horse doesn't appear to be breathing, it is very difficult to make him breathe. There are ways to do it, such as jumping on his chest, but if it has got to this stage, it's highly unlikely you're going to be able to do anything about it unless the vet is there to administer drugs. In these cases, it's important to be realistic about what you can do to help.



C

CIRCULATION

You may also need to check the horse's pulse by placing your fingers on the facial artery, which runs along the inside of the jawbone. It is quite thick and feels like a Biro in width. The normal pulse rate is between 35 and 40 beats per minute. An increased heart rate could suggest severe blood loss, shock or pain. A low pulse rate could also suggest shock or hypothermia.

Stem the flow

Blood loss is always worrying to see. But the average horse has 50 litres of blood and he can easily lose 5% of that without noticing. He could probably even lose 10% without any detrimental effects to his health. So the average horse is able to lose five litres without any problems – that's a lot of blood! Therefore, it's quite rare for blood loss in horses to be very serious. Also, horses have very effective spleens which put more blood into the circulation – as a horse loses blood, the spleen contracts and increases circulating blood.

If a horse is losing a lot of blood, apply pressure to the area using the cleanest thing you can find as padding. If you don't have anything to hand, just use your hands. If you have bandage material and the area is easy to bandage, you could apply a tight pressure bandage. As you'll be calling the vet out straightaway, it won't matter how tight the bandage is for a short amount of time – 45 minutes to an hour will be fine.

When to call it a day

Understandably, none of us want to give much thought to the end of our horse's lives, but it is very important to think about it. Sadly, in an emergency situation where the horse is very sick or seriously injured, there is often very little time to make a decision about whether to try to treat the horse or to euthanase him. You may only have a matter of minutes to decide, when you're likely to be in shock yourself and unable to think straight.

The hope is that you'll never have to make that call, but if you give some thought as to what circumstances would make you decide to call it a day and consider all the what ifs, you'll be well-prepared. It's far better to have a plan in your mind than to have to make a rushed decision at the time.

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