Emergencies: When to Call Your Horse's Veterinarian

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Do you know when to call for veterinary care?

What would you do if your horse broke his leg? Would you immediately call your equine veterinarian if your pony developed a slight fever? Is your mare's reduced appetite reason for concern?

Horse owners ask themselves these and similar questions throughout their horse's life. But do you know what wounds, illnesses, and injuries constitute an emergency? True, each situation is different. But there are some basic guidelines to help you determine when to seek veterinary care for your horse.

Know Your Horse's Vital Signs

Knowing your horse's normal temperature, pulse, and respiration is important. Your horse's vital signs are the first clue to an illness, injury, or other abnormality. Take his temperature and measure his heart and respiratory rates at different times over a few days to determine what is average. Normal ranges are:

Temperature - 99°F to 101°F, though temperature may increase by up to 3 degrees depending on ambient temperature, level of exercise, and degree of dehydration. Your horse's temperature is taken rectally, using a digital thermometer.

Pulse/Heart Rate - 32-48 beats per minute, though age, ambient temperature, humidity, exercise, and excitement can all affect your horse's heart rate. Check his heart rate with a stethoscope placed over his ribs, just behind the elbow. Or take his pulse on the inside of the jaw or on the ankle.

Respiratory Rate - 12-16 breaths per minute, though ambient temperature, humidity, exercise, and excitement can all affect your horse's breathing rate. Watch the nostrils or flanks and count the number of times he breathes out.

In addition, always check your horse for wounds, soreness, or injuries while you groom him.

The Three Stages Of Equine Emergencies

Basically, all horse wounds, injuries, and illnesses fall into three categories: critical, urgent, and minor. A critical emergency requires immediate attention by your equine veterinarian. At the other end of the spectrum, an elective emergency can often be observed until your next veterinarian visit. Of course, when in doubt contact your veterinarian. As with most things, safe is always better than sorry.

Before You Call

Regardless of the type of emergency your horse has suffered, there is some information your veterinarian will need to immediately assess the situation. Gather the following information before you call for veterinary care:

- Temperature, pulse/heart rate, and respiratory rate
- Location and severity of any injury, wound, or lameness
- Your horse's demeanor, including depression or agitation

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- Location of any swelling and if there is any heat present

Stage 1: Critical Emergencies - Contact Your Veterinarian Immediately

The following are just some of the situations that are serious and potentially life-threatening. Immediately contact your equine veterinarian if your horse exhibits:

- Bone fractures or severe lameness on which your horse cannot bear his weight
- Abnormal respiration, including rapid, distressed breathing or blocked airways
- Profuse bleeding from any injury or wound, especially if the blood is bright red
- Neurological dysfunction (staggering, lack of coordination, or behavior change)
- Eye injury or trauma, especially if your horse is unwilling to open his eyelids
- Injury to any vital structure (eyes, genitals, joints, etc) or wounds requiring stitches
- Signs of severe colic, including loss of appetite and reduced fecal production
- Abnormal vital signs, including:
  - Temperature over 102°F
  - Pulse over 80 beats per minute
  - Elevated breathing while at rest
- Acute laminitis, seizures, heat stroke, severe or persistent colic, or watery diarrhea
- Any mare who takes longer than 30 minutes to deliver her foal
- Suspected or known ingestion of a poison or toxin
- Puncture wounds

Stage 2: Urgent Emergencies - Contact Your Veterinarian That Same Day or the Next Morning

The following situations need prompt attention; however, each can usually be managed with certain first aid measures. Contact your veterinarian to schedule an appointment as soon as possible if your horse exhibits:

- Sudden onset of lameness on which your horse can bear his weight
- Superficial trauma or injury away from the eyes, genitals, joints, etc.
- Chronic laminitis or chronic inflammatory respiratory disease flare-ups
- Slightly elevated temperature, respiration, or heart rate

Stage 3: Minor Emergencies - Schedule an Appointment With Your Veterinarian

The following situations can usually wait for a scheduled appointment. However, you should continually monitor your horse and contact your veterinarian immediately if any minor emergency worsens. Observe your horse closely and make a note to discuss with your veterinarian if your horse exhibits:

- Slight lameness
- Skin rashes, etc
- Slight eye discharge without pain or vision loss
- Slightly reduced appetite but otherwise healthy
- Slight difficulty chewing

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Slight nasal discharge without fever or heavy breathing

Simple Ways To Help Prevent Equine Emergencies

In some regards, illnesses, injuries, and wounds are inevitable for most horses. However, there are certain things you can do to help prevent many illnesses and curb some injuries before they occur. The key is to keep your horse in the best health possible.

In addition, you should discuss emergency care with any individual that tends to your horse. This is especially important if you board your horse or if someone is watching over him while you are away on vacation. In fact, any person who is in contact with your horse should have your veterinarian's contact information. You should also file a written waiver with your equine veterinarian that authorizes your chosen caregiver(s) to arrange for veterinary care while you are away.

Equine emergencies are always a frightening time. However, by assessing the situation with the above guidelines in mind, you can help ensure your horse is quickly on the road to recovery.

To keep your horse healthy, always:

- Schedule regular physical exams
- Immunize your horse with the correct vaccines
- Control internal parasites with appropriate dewormers
- Control insects with appropriate repellents, fly sheets, and traps
- Schedule regular dental exams and farrier visits

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