



Horse Care:

Equine First Aid

Stay calm and stay safe

When you first discover an injury or illness, your horse may be frightened and in pain. Even the most docile horse may become unpredictable in these circumstances. Protect yourself first - you won't be able to help your horse if you're also injured. Before rushing in, take a breath and assess the situation.

Ask yourself:

- Is it safe to approach?
- Do I need help from another person to steady the horse?
- Do I have my first aid kit ready?
- Do I need to call the vet immediately?

When should I call the vet immediately?

Many apparent emergencies do not need a vet immediately. However, call your vet immediately if you see signs of, or suspect:

Severe bleeding

If the bleeding (from a nostril, wound or anywhere else) doesn't stop on its own within a few minutes, be worried. Applying pressure may help, but your horse may be too painful to allow this and may need sedation from the vet. Arterial bleeding (i.e. bleeding from a main artery) is an emergency; the blood may be shooting out in pulses and will almost certainly need veterinary intervention.

Deep penetrating wounds / wounds over a joint

It can be hard to know how deep or contaminated a wound is, especially if you're unsure what caused the injury. Bacteria can be deposited deep under the skin or even into the joint itself, resulting in a very serious infection from just a small external wound.

Avoid putting any products on the wound until it has been assessed by a vet. Most shop bought products will not be sterile (especially if it has sat open in a tack room for 6 months!) and applying it may introduce bacteria into the wound, doing more harm than good.

Signs of colic

Colic, put simply, means 'tummy pain'. Depending on the underlying cause, colic can vary from mild, self-resolving cases to the most serious ones which need emergency surgery. Ring the vet for any signs of abdominal pain as the early stages of any colic can appear similar.

Signs that the colic is more serious include:

- **A high heart rate:** Over 44 beats per minute, but there is some variation with age etc.
- **A change in gum colour:** A healthy colour is salmon pink. Any change to this (very pale pink, white, dark red or a blue-ish tinge) suggests something more serious.
- **Severe abdominal pain:** Typically, resulting in persistent rolling / belly kicking / unsettled behaviour.
- **Profuse sweating.**

At any point if you are concerned about your horse, **always call your vet**. They will be able to advise you on the phone and decide whether a call out is required, and how to care for your horse in the meantime.

Managing Wounds and Bleeding

DO:

- **Try to control the bleeding:** If your horse will safely allow you to, apply gentle, firm pressure using a clean pad or gamgee. Don't panic if there's quite a lot of blood initially - horses have a large blood volume and many skin wounds look dramatic but aren't life-threatening.
- **Flush the wound:** If it's dirty, gently rinse with clean water or saline. Avoid scrubbing or poking into the wound, as this can push debris deeper.
- **Keep it clean and covered:** If practical, apply a non-stick dressing to the wound (e.g. melolin) and a light bandage wrap on top to keep it clean.

DO NOT:

- **Apply ointments, powders or sprays:** Only use any products if specifically instructed by your vet. These can interfere with the vet's assessment, slow down natural healing, or even cause more damage to the tissues.

Managing Lameness and Swellings

DO:

- **Bring the horse in** from the field to a safe, quiet area.
- Check for **obvious injuries**, heat, swelling etc.
- **Cold hosing** can help reduce swelling if it doesn't distress your horse.
- If your horse is severely lame (unable to bear weight), **keep them as still as possible** until your vet arrives- don't force them to walk unnecessarily.

DO NOT:

- **Give painkillers or anti-inflammatories** without veterinary advice. They may mask symptoms your vet needs to assess.

Managing Colic

DO:

- **Call your vet immediately**, even if the signs seem mild - things can get worse, fast.
- **Remove feed** but allow access to fresh water.
- **Walk the horse gently**: If it is safe, but don't venture far from safety. Rolling is your horse's way of trying to relieve pain. Rolling will not cause a gut twist, so if they cannot be safely encouraged onto their feet try to make the area safe and allow them to roll.
- Keep them under **close supervision** until your vet arrives.

DO NOT:

- **Give any medication** until assessed by a vet.
- **Risk injury to yourself** by staying in the stable if the horse is violently thrashing.

Managing Eye Injuries

Wounds or swellings on the eyelids may mean the eyeball is damaged too, but this can be hard to see if your horse is squinting and painful. Your vet can use sedation, local anaesthetic drops and special dyes to assess the eye properly.

DO:

- Keep the horse calm and **out of bright sunlight**.
- **Protect the eye** by using a fly mask if tolerated.
- **Call your vet**.

DO NOT:

- **'Wait and see'**: eye injuries can deteriorate rapidly.
- **Apply ointments or creams** from your cupboard—you could easily do more harm than good.
- **Apply boiling water** to the eyeball.

Your equine first aid kit – what do I need?

Owning horses means accepting that bumps, cuts, and emergencies will happen. Having a stocked first aid kit handy and making a sensible plan will help you provide safe, effective first aid to your horse while waiting for your vet when needed.

At a minimum, it should include:

- Clean cotton wool or gamgee
- Non-stick dressings (e.g. Melolin)
- Sterile saline solution (or access to clean water)
- Elastic self-adherent bandages (e.g. Vet Wrap)
- Adhesive tape
- Scissors
- Thermometer
- Clean gloves
- A clean bucket and sponge
- Torch
- Emergency contact numbers (e.g. vet, farrier, transporter)

Keep everything in a clean, waterproof box, and check regularly for expired or used-up items.