



Safety Up – On Safe Horse Handling

Horses are creatures of instinct and habit. Psychologically they are hard-wired to be wary of their surroundings and react to the slightest threat of danger. This comes from the days of their wild ancestors roaming the open fields keeping careful watch out for predators and other threats. Of course through the generations humans have created a domesticated animal, but the flight-or-fight tendencies still prevail when horses feel their safety is at risk.

For these reasons it is imperative that we understand some of the triggers that set off a horse's reaction to potential threats and how we can protect ourselves while handling and riding or driving horses. We must remember that safety for the human is the number one concern; safety for the horse is number two and all other concerns are number three. **Know the job. Know the hazard. Know the drill.**

If you plan to handle a horse, be sure you are comfortable with the task at hand. If you are stressed or feel too inexperienced, your horse will surely sense this and react. In this situation, have an experienced horse person do the handling for you and take the time to learn from her or him.

Flight or Fight Triggers

If you know the kinds of triggers that can put a horse into alert/panic mode, it is easier to anticipate potential danger and learn to avoid it.

- Fast/sudden movement
- Things that creep along the ground, especially toward the horse (hose, plastic bags in the wind, etc.)
- Loud noises
- Confinement such as small stalls or horse trailers, or being tied too short.

Windy Days

Windy days put all of the horse's senses into high gear. Sensory overload makes equine instincts take precedence over learned behaviors. So even if your horse is normally calm and accepting of certain things, windy conditions can make him nervous and overly cautious.

Equine Body Language

It's important when dealing with horses to know basic body language. The horse, like most animals, is a non-verbal creature of habit; it responds and reacts with nonverbal communication. And horses rarely lie...

- Swishing tail means he's irritated. If there are no bugs, he could be irritated with you!
- Ears – flat against the head means aggression, pricked forward means he's focused on something ahead of him, turned back means he's focused on something behind him, and just "there" means he's not worried.

- General body position – tense muscles, erect head and neck means he’s unsure of something and on high alert; a lowered head and relaxed body mean he’s comfortable and not expecting any danger; and a cocked leg can either mean he’s resting, or, if other body language suggests tension, he may be taking aim – better have a plan in place.

Your Body Language

When working around horses be calm and methodical. The horse is always observing how you react to him and your surroundings. If you are confident, you are likely to instill confidence in the horse.

Clothing and Equipment

If you are going to work with horses, you need to wear clothing that is appropriate for the activity and use the proper equipment:

Handling:

- Gloves
- Closed-toed/protective boots
- Long sleeved shirt
- Durable pants.

Riding:

- Approved* HELMET!
- Boots with a heel to prevent foot from getting caught in the stirrups
- Breeches/tall boots to prevent chaffing
- Properly fitted and well-maintained tack.

Safe Handling Tips

Leading:

- The safest way to lead is with a properly-fitted halter and lead rope. Don’t try to lead a horse without the rope.
- Stay to the side of the horse – alongside the neck – to prevent getting stepped/trampled on.
- Give the horse enough head room so that he doesn’t panic, but not so much he can jerk free.
- Never coil the end of the lead shank around your hand – neatly fold it in your free hand.

General:

- Tie the horse no lower than the height of his withers. Give the horse some slack to free his head, but not so much that he can get tangled up in the rope.
- Learn to use a quick release knot. Always use this type of knot when tying a horse.
- Never duck under the horse’s neck when he is tied up.
- Don’t put yourself in a position to be squished between the horse and a wall. Always stand the horse perpendicular to the wall while working around him.
- Never stand directly behind a horse, as this is the horse’s blind spot. To pass around behind, keep your hand on his rump, stay close to his body and quickly and calmly walk from one side to the other.
- When working around or with the horse’s legs or feet, do not kneel. Always stay on your feet, ready and able to push yourself away in case the horse jumps or kicks.

**Safe riding helmets are certified/approved by ASTM/SEI, BSI/BS EN, EN 1384, EN 14572 or AS/NZS. Check for these labels.*

Brain Buckets...

Your helmet really is your best friend. Read on.

- Horseback riding carries a higher injury rate per hour of exposure than downhill ski racing, football, hang-gliding and motorcycle racing.
- Medical Examiner reports show that 60% or more of horse-related deaths are caused by head injuries. Helmets can reduce this possibility by 70-80%.
- Repeated trauma to the head, even when minimal, can cause cumulative damage to the brain. Each new accident expands the original damage and the brain cannot recover 100% from injury.
- Non-certified helmets offer no protection whatsoever and are strictly for cosmetic purposes.
- Head injuries are responsible for more than 60% of horse-related deaths.
- Head injuries are the most common reason for horse-related hospital admissions.

Need we say more??

Reference:

Use Your Head, Wear Your Helmet!, University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System
http://www.canr.uconn.edu/ansci/equine/helmet_safety/index.htm

Additional Online Resources:

Applied Heading: Handling Stallions, Ron Meredith, <http://www.myequinenetwork.com/News/tabid/56/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/695/Applied-Heading-Handling-Stallions.aspx>

The Basics of Horse Handling and Human Safety, Horsemen's Council of Illinois,
<http://www.horsemencouncil.org/pdfs/Basics%20of%20horse%20handlingW.pdf>

Does Your Riding Helmet Fit?, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food & Rural Affairs, Ontario,
<http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/livestock/horses/facts/helmet.htm>

Tack Safety Check Chart, Equisearch.com,
<http://special.equisearch.com/downloads/charts/EQTackSafetyCheckChart.pdf>