

Emergencies - when to call the vet



Every owner will at some time have to deal with an emergency involving their horse. It is essential to know how to deal with such emergencies before they arise and to know who to call when they do. Although concern is understandable when you think your horse is unwell or in pain, if your horse is ill at night your vet will appreciate it if you can wait until the morning to call them unless the condition is an emergency.

So how do I recognise an emergency?

Firstly you need to know your horse and to know what signs are normal. Get to know what is 'normal' for your horse in terms of demeanour (temperament and habits), appetite, urination/defaecation and stance.

Normal signs in the adult horse

- Temperature: 37.5-38 degrees C (99.5-100.5 degrees F). Call your vet immediately if the temperature exceeds 39 degrees C (102.5 degrees F).
- Respiration: 8-20 breaths per minute.
- Pulse rate: 30-50 beats per minute, depending on the size of the horse.

These are known as 'vital signs' and if a combination of all or some of them appear abnormal then it is a good indication that something may be wrong.

What should I do?

Be prepared!

It is essential that anyone who owns or cares for a horse has emergency contact details to hand. These should include:

- The telephone number of your veterinary surgery, name of your usual vet and your reference number (if applicable).
- The insurance policy number if your horse is insured.
- Names and telephone numbers of friends and neighbours who can provide assistance while you wait for the vet.

First aid kit

Make up a first aid kit and keep it in a clean, dry place in the stable - and also in the horse box if you have one. The basic first aid kit should include:

- Rectal thermometer.
- Cotton wool/Gamgee tissue.
- Gauze pads (assorted sizes).
- Bandages (crepe/elastic/elastoplast).
- Sharp scissors.
- Antiseptic cream and/or ointment.
- Wound powder with fly repellent.
- Clean bucket.
- Towels/soap.
- Insecticides, eg louse powder and fly repellents.

Remember to regularly check the expiry or 'use by' dates and replace any items as necessary.

When do I need to call my vet as an emergency?

There are various reasons why you should call your vet urgently. First aid is about administering treatment that will limit pain and damage to your horse whilst waiting for help from a friend or your vet. Conditions that may require emergency treatment include:

- Wounds and other traumatic injuries.
- Colic.
- Laminitis.
- Severe lameness (non-weight bearing).
- 'Tying up' (Rhabdomyolysis).
- 'Heaves' or 'asthma' attack.



1. Wounds

Wounds include open cuts (lacerations), grazes (abrasions) and bruises.

The first step you should take is to prevent further injury: catch your horse and calm it. If it can walk, move it to a stable. Get assistance (not the vet) - someone to hold your horse while you inspect the wound. Do not try to examine the wound without assistance because any horse in pain can behave unpredictably and you could become injured yourself.

Bathe the wound with cold, clean water - this has the added benefits of cleaning the wound, stemming bleeding and reducing swelling.

Evaluate the wound and call your vet for advice if there is:

- Excessive bleeding (haemorrhage). NB Wounds on lower limbs can bleed profusely. Bandage these firmly with gauze pads to stem the flow of blood.
- Penetration or puncture through the entire skin thickness.
- A wound close to a joint.
- A severe wound at or below knee level.
- Wound contamination.

Action until the vet arrives, or for minor wounds:

- Cleanse the wound fully using cotton wool and antiseptic wound solution diluted according to the directions on the pack.
- Apply a small amount of antiseptic cream or ointment (do not use sprays and powders at this stage).
- Then apply a gamgee bandage. When applying bandages where swelling is likely, pad the areas above and below the injury and apply the bandage firmly but not too tight. Tight bandages can cut off the circulation.

If the wound is minor, leave the bandage in place for 3-5 days - however, monitor daily and remove if there is unpleasant discharge or smell. When removed, apply antiseptic ointment or powder but monitor daily for contamination or insect infestation.

Tetanus antitoxin may be required if tetanus vaccination has not been kept up to date.

2. Colic

Colic (abdominal pain) has many different causes. Some cases resolve with simple owner care and management; others require veterinary attention and possibly surgery; and unfortunately a small number of horses with colic do not recover.

Signs of mild colic

- Pawing or scraping the ground.
- Turning the head to look at the abdomen ('flank watching').
- Circling.
- Kicking or biting at the abdomen.
- Stetching out and lying down.

Action

- Walk your horse slowly. This encourages normal gut function and also helps to keep your horse calm.
- Try to stop your horse from rolling, as this may bruise or displace the intestines.
- Check the stable for sharp objects that could injure your horse if it rolls.
- Monitor your horse regularly. Contact your vet if the signs progress or if they are still present after 45 minutes. Remember to tell the vet what action you have already taken and what the response has been.
- Do not administer any drugs, including wormers, unless instructed to do so by your vet. Drugs may mask symptoms and prevent accurate diagnosis.

Signs of severe colic

- Violent scraping.
- Inability to stand.

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- Rolling.
- Sitting in a dog-like position.
- Sweating.
- Rapid respiration rate (sometimes with flared nostrils).
- Elevated pulse rate (more than 52 beats per minute).

Action

- Contact your vet immediately and describe the signs and duration of the colic.
- Do not administer any drugs, including wormers, unless instructed to do so by your vet. Drugs may mask symptoms and prevent accurate diagnosis.
- Do not put yourself at risk of injury if your horse is rolling violently - stay well back.

3. Laminitis

Laminitis (or 'founder') is a painful condition of the hooves. It results from the disruption of normal blood flow in the foot.

Trigger events for acute laminitis:

- Abrupt changes in diet or overeating, especially lush grass or grain - 'grain overload'.
- Severe colic.
- Recent heavy exercise on hard surfaces.
- Severe infection or illness causing high temperatures, eg pneumonia or retained placenta after foaling.
- Excessive weight-bearing on one leg because of injury to another leg.
- Long-term use or high doses of steroids.

Signs of acute laminitis:

- Lameness and reluctance to move.
- Characteristic stance - weight is shifted to the hindlimbs with the forelimbs stretched out in front.
- Pain in the toe region when pressure is applied.

If your horse has any of these symptoms call your vet immediately. If you suspect your horse has overeaten, tell your vet what was eaten and when.

Action while waiting for the vet to arrive:

- Stable your horse on deep bedding (shavings or paper).
- Encourage it to lie down to take pressure off the feet.
- Remove food (but do not remove water).

4. Severe lameness

There are many causes of severe non-weight bearing lameness ranging from simple problems such as foot infections ('pus in the foot') to major injuries such as fractures and tendon ruptures.

Signs of severe lameness:

- There may be obvious signs of a wound and/or swelling.
- Reluctance to move.
- Reluctance to carry any weight on affected leg.

Contact your vet for advice.

Action while waiting for your vet to arrive:

- If your horse is stabled, keep it calm until the vet arrives.
- If your horse is outside, hold it on a long rein attached to a bridle or head collar.
- Do not attempt to apply splints to the leg.
- Do not give your horse any drugs.

5. Tying up (Rhabdomyolysis, 'set fast')

Tying up is a condition affecting the muscles and is similar to cramp in humans, although more serious. It usually occurs when a horse has been rested for a few days and then exercised intensely. Instead of

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normally clearing the waste products of exercise (lactic acid), the muscles accumulate them.

Signs of tying up:

- Stiffness (usually in the hindlegs) progressing to severe rigidity and inability to walk.
- Pain and very hard stiff muscles when pressing over hindquarters.
- Sweating and signs of distress and intense pain (muscle tremors).
- Discoloured urine.

Action:

- Discontinue exercise immediately. Do not try to force severely affected horses to walk.
- Rug your horse or warm its back and loins with hot, wet towels to improve the circulation.
- Reduce energy-rich feed.

If these steps do not produce any relief, contact your vet.

6. 'Heaves' or asthma attack

Heaves (attacks of heavy, laboured breathing with sweating and distress) can be caused by allergic reactions to dust. They can be very alarming for owners but it is important to remain calm in these situations - there are simple steps you can take which help your horse to breathe.

Action

Contact your vet. He/she may suggest that you carry out some of the following measures:

- Place your horse in a clean, open, dust-free space, ie move out of the stable to a paddock.
- Allow your horse to breathe warm moist air. This can help to open the airways and may calm the horse. This can be achieved by placing a bucket of hot (steaming) water containing a few drops of eucalyptus oil in the stable with your horse. Do not allow your horse to drink this water!

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Hampden Veterinary Hospital on 01296 423666 and we will be happy to advise you.