

Trail Riding Injuries

A little first-aid know-how and a cool head will go a long way if your horse sustains an injury on the trail.

By Jennifer Whitmire

Getting out on the trail gives you and your horse an opportunity to enjoy a change of scenery or a new challenge. But being out on the trail also means that you may be on your own if faced with a medical emergency. Are you ready for that? Would you know what to do if your horse tied up, cut himself or suffered a serious stone bruise?

Being prepared for an unexpected emergency is not only important, it's imperative. The majority of injuries that occur out on the trail are mild in nature and in many cases could not have been prevented. They happen to everyone at one time or another, so there's little point in chastising yourself for having made a mistake while your horse is standing there bleeding. Instead, deal with the incident quickly and with a clear head. Trail season is upon us, and with every trek comes the likelihood of a mishap. Rather than sitting home, prepare yourself for whatever might happen. Armed with certain first-aid supplies and some knowledge, you don't have to feel helpless if your horse gets injured.

Common Injuries

Stone bruising is one common injury, which, although not usually serious, can put an end to your ride. The horse will experience mild to marked pain. You will not note any swelling, but the pain will cause lameness, which will not likely improve. Stand the horse in a cool creek — if one is available — and place an Easyboot on the affected hoof and lead him back home. Usually, these injuries require a lengthy lay-up but are not terribly severe. To help prevent stone bruises, Nancy Elliot, D.V.M., who specializes in endurance horses, suggests toughening the soles of the hooves with iodine or iodine/formalin prior to the trip and using pads.

Sprains and strains to soft tissues, tendons and ligaments are also fairly common. These injuries

can cause mild, marked or severe pain. You will notice swelling and possibly heat in the affected area. The horse will also exhibit lameness. "Sprains and strains are more difficult to gauge in the field," says C. Mike Tomlinson, D.V.M. "The degree of lameness may be the only signs available to the rider." With a soft-tissue injury, further damage will occur if the horse continues to work. Stand the horse in a cold creek or apply a cold pack immediately, then lead the horse back home or to a central location. Contact a veterinarian immediately.

The most important method of preventing such injuries is to be certain your horse is conditioned for the terrain and distance you will be riding. If your horse is not prepared, you are bound to run into trouble at some point. Dr. Tomlinson also suggests that you know the limitations of your abilities and those of your horse.

Also very common are abrasions and lacerations. These injuries can appear severe, but usually are nothing more than superficial wounds. The horse may lose what seems to be a significant amount of blood from a superficial wound, so it is wise to gauge the injury based on the amount of pain it is causing the horse and the location of the injury. An injury in and around a joint is much more serious than a small laceration that is only skin deep or involves minimal muscle tissue. Exposed tendon or bone is also serious and

should be treated carefully. Determine the severity of the injury, and use a bandage or bandana compress to protect the wound from dirt and to stop the bleeding. The wound may require nothing more than a cleaning and a bandage and you can be on your way. Before continuing, however, consider what effect this may have. Is it painful for the horse, possibly causing him to stumble? Will it cause further injury to this area, or will it increase the possibility for scar tissue? You may need to be a little more careful and ride the horse back home for additional first-aid treatment, or if severity calls for it, walk the horse back home. Rinse the wound with a mild saline solution. You can make this solution with a teaspoon of salt and a quart of water. Disinfect and protect the wound with Betadine ointment or bacterial cream, cover with gauze and wrap. If the injury is below the pastern area, wrap the entire foot. If it is in a hard-to-bandage area, use a duct-tape X to hold the gauze in place.

These injuries are hard to prevent and are usually mild in nature. However, if proper first aid is not administered at the time of injury, problems can develop later. Be sure to disinfect and protect any and all wounds from dirt and insects. If you feel that vital tissues have been damaged, or if the horse seems to be in severe pain, seek veterinary assistance as soon as possible.

Eye injuries and irritations can occur unexpectedly. Dust, allergens or insects can cause eyes to weep and become swollen and sore. Ask your vet to recommend an eye rinse and ointment, especially if your horse is sensitive to any of these things. Branches and other protruding objects, as well as falling or floating objects, can injure an eye. A slight scratch can be very painful and irritating. If the eye is swelling or tearing with excessive squinting, inspect the surface for debris or foreign objects. Use a dry cotton swab or eye wash to carefully remove any particles. If the horse continues to be in great discomfort or the vision seems impaired, seek veterinary care immediately.

Crisis on the Trail

The most severe problems are tying up, dehydration and exhaustion. While these are three separate, distinct problems, they are often interrelated. "A metabolic problem, such as tying up or exhaustion, is most worrisome and can rapidly develop life-threatening implications," says Dr. Elliot.

Electrolytes, which are inorganic salt compounds, are essential to many of the chemical processes of the horse's body. These chemical processes are responsible for nearly all of the horse's bodily functions. Equine sweat is heavily concentrated with electrolytes. Therefore, heavy sweating causes rapid depletion of these essential compounds in the blood. As the horse's fitness level is increased, however, the amount of the essential salts lost in sweat decreases.

A horse's normal body temperature is 97 to 101 degrees Fahrenheit. Any temperature above 103 degrees Fahrenheit begins to take its toll on the horse's fuel efficiency. The body begins to require even more energy to perform the same task, causing the body temperature to rise further. Take the horse's temperature under the saddle if he feels hot or is acting erratically. If he feels hot but is not sweating, or if the sweat is sticky or smells strong, get him cooled off immediately. If at any point you feel your horse is having trouble, get veterinary help immediately.

You may notice your horse displaying a subtle lack of coordination. He may become fretful or agitated, he may not be able to pay attention and he may seem sluggish or slow. If the horse's body temperature rises to 105 degrees for more than a few minutes, the

horse loses his ability to sweat (causing colic), and loses interest in drinking. He will experience severe disorientation. At this point you have five to 10 minutes to bring his temperature down, or he will likely collapse, begin convulsing and die. It is critical to begin bringing his body temperature down. If he will walk, get him to shade or a breezy area. Pour water on him, drape him with wet towels or clothing, fan him with shirts or towels and massage his muscles to encourage blood flow to continue in the tissues. This will help the blood find its way to the surface to cool.

As you can see, a metabolic-related problem is one of the most severe of the trail riding injuries. However, there are many things you can do to prevent them. "A fit horse that has been fed properly is extremely resistant to these problems," says Dr. Tomlinson. "If you take an unfit, over-grained, overweight, excitable horse on a long, hard, fast ride on a warm, humid day, I can nearly promise you will get a combination of all three problems. If you do the opposite, you should be just fine."

Feeding your horse cool feed prior to the ride is important. Don't load him up on hot food that will require extra work from his metabolism. Although the direct causes of tying up are still a mystery, it has been linked to hot feed, humidity and sudden starts and stops in hard work. Learn how to read, gauge and increase your horse's electrolyte level. There are many good products on the market to supplement your horse's electrolyte level.

Discuss how and when to use these products with your veterinarian. Many people will load up their horses with electrolytes prior to a hard workout, but it is important to know and understand what you are doing.

Be aware of the environment you will be riding in and prepare for it. If it is hot and humid, you will need to take extra precautions to prevent dehydration and tying up. You should make as much water available as possible. Find out about the water availability and plan your ride accordingly if you know water will be sparse. Take breaks and remove the saddle to allow heat to escape. And most importantly, condition your horse for his intended use. "Separate groups by ability and fitness level," suggests Dr. Elliot. "Don't expect a 20-year-old trail horse to keep up with a 6-year-old endurance horse. A horse fretting to keep up with his buddies can be in grave danger."

It is equally important to cool your horse down slowly. Many horses get through a long ride, only to begin acting strange once they get back home. Continue cooling your horse until his temperature is below 102 degrees. Offering additional electrolytes should be done to help replenish the supply lost during the ride. If you will be doing multi-day rides, you must replenish what was lost during the first day before you can begin loading for the next.

According to Dr. Elliot, "The vast majority of the time, a metabolic crisis is precipitated by rider ignorance." Be aware of this condition and prepare for it. "The prevention of all three," says Dr. Tomlinson, "consists of the same advice: proper conditioning." It is critically important that you be aware of what the impending ride will be asking of your horse and be prepared for it.

Whether you ride for enjoyment or are involved in competition, it is important to understand and prepare for these unforeseen emergencies. Out on the trail, you don't have the luxury of a 5-minute vet call. You must be fully aware of the possibilities and be prepared to prevent and handle each one. Be aware of what this new area may bring. Have your first-aid kit stocked and ready for any emergency. Today, the luxury of cellular phones gives you an advantage. Use it! If you have any doubts or questions, stick

with your common sense and don't be afraid to ask for help. And most importantly, condition your horse so that he will be physically ready for the ride. The less he struggles, the more you and your horse will enjoy the adventure.