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Don't Drown Your Horse, Part 2 ★★★★★

Have you taken a "Horse Swimming Safety Course" with your local Red Cross? Of course not--there is not such a thing.

In developed countries we have resources for teaching people how to drown-proof and how to properly attend to drowning incidents, yet it is still a leading cause for unintentional injury death as more than 3,000 people drown each year (that is over nine per day.)

- Read the [in-depth CDC report on drowning deaths in the USA](#).

- Listen to a [podcast](#) discussing learning to swim--your first defense against drowning.
- How to get your horses started learning to enjoy swimming in the water, safely. Do it right so you and your horse can enjoy the thrill of swimming in a fun and relaxed manner.

The most familiar horse swimming event in the world is the annual [Pony Penning](#) in Chincoteague/Assateague, N.C., made famous in the books by Marguerite Henry. Notice the care that the Fire Department uses to ensure that Pony Penning swims are conducted at low tide, slack water and that there are first responders in boats available to assist with the wild horses if any of them have problems. Since these horses are swum every year back and forth to the island, they act as a herd and that provides motivation for the horses to "follow the leader." This year's swim took almost six minutes.

Where should you start? First, don't go in the water until you are a good swimmer yourself! Then set yourself up for success by waiting until you and the horse are itchy, warm and sweaty from exertion, then find a safe swimming spot. Before hand, you should make sure there are no obstacles in or under the water such as trees, boulders, branches, pilings, submerged cars, etc. Make sure there is not a steep drop-off into deep water. Also check for mud - sandy or rocky bottoms are best, and a lot of room for the horse to swim. Since a horse's legs are so long, you may have to use a stick to probe the bottom before taking your horse into the water. Plan to get wet and muddy when you participate in this activity with your horse, particularly the first couple of times when training him to go into the water.

Anticipate being satisfied with any effort on his part to go into the water, maybe not taking him to swimming depth the first few times until his confidence is gained. Swimming horses is best attempted with no entanglements (saddles, bridles, girths, reins, martingales, or breast collars). Find a dry spot to place your saddle and tack, perhaps on a log or low branch above the swimming area. Stay on the ground at first to encourage him to go willingly into the water. Your safest equipment will be to use a good halter with lead rope, taking special care to ensure that the rope does not get tangled around the horse's feet, head and neck, or you. You've heard people say to carry a knife to cut ropes that might get entangled and that is true for on-land rescues - but in the water, a horse drowns so quickly in an emergency that you probably won't be able to save it in time, even with a knife.

Horses are fascinated by water. They may want to paw at the water, roll in the shallows, or even blow bubbles! (Very few horses will refuse to go into water if a buddy goes in first.) Go to the end of your lead-rope and let the horse look, smell, paw and convince himself that it is not going to eat him. Use care to stay out of the way of pawing hooves as he explores this new environment, don't stand in front of the horse in case he launches himself forward, it is safer by his shoulder. If you have chosen a safe, shallow place to enter the water, with patience and time he will get his feet into the water. If you are getting your horse into the ocean, let him spend a lot of time getting used to the movement of the waves and sounds of the beach before trying to get him in the water.

Once the horse is in to his carpals (knees) you can start gently sponging or splashing him with water on his belly, legs, and chest. Most horses quickly realize how good that feels, and may let you splash even onto their backs. Take a cup and/or sponge and basically give the horse a bath with the water, taking your time to show him how good it feels. If your horse has a positive experience, it will translate to an even better attitude later on. Use the ideas of approach and retreat to teach the horse that being in the lake is not a permanent condition! You might ask him to go in deeper, then retreat to the beach, then ask him to back in or side- pass into the water. Will he circle around you as though longing through the water? Build his confidence by asking for a trot through the water, either leading or riding.

At some point with your patience, the horse will get into deeper water and become buoyant enough that his feet will come off the bottom. If your horse is surprised at this, he may panic a bit at the new sensation of floating. Allow the horse to swim back into where he can touch bottom, praise him for the effort, allow him to rest, then try again. Try not to let him go all the way out onto the beach when he retreats, but if he does just start over again asking him to move his feet into deeper water.

When the horse is comfortable with actually swimming around you, you can use the mane to support yourself and ride the horse into the deeper water. Let your body float while holding onto the mane--do not pull on the single rein unless it appears that the horse is confused--and pull to the side, not down. To avoid a serious kick in the face, do not be tempted to grab the tail of your horse to be pulled thru the water.

Make it fun and interesting for your horse, and increase your and his safety by teaching him to swim. Good luck and we would enjoy seeing pictures of your experiences with swimming.