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Safety Around Horses

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A Basic Guide for Beginning Horse People:

Getting involved in horses is a wonderful and rewarding way to learn new skills, develop a relationship with a fascinating animal, and meet new friends in the process. Like many activities, however, equestrian sport also involves some degree of risk. Horses are large, powerful animals, easily capable of injuring a person. But, if you are well armed with a basic understanding of horses, a few hard and fast rules, and your own good sense, the risks are readily minimized.

- Never touch or feed a horse without the owner's permission.
- Approach a horse from the front or side, never from the rear. Announce your presence and offer your hand for the animal to smell.
- Avoid sudden movements such as waving, running etc.
- Speak quietly; avoid loud or unusual noises.
- Keep young children and dogs under direct control at all times.
- Sturdy footwear and an approved helmet are essential if you intend to ride.

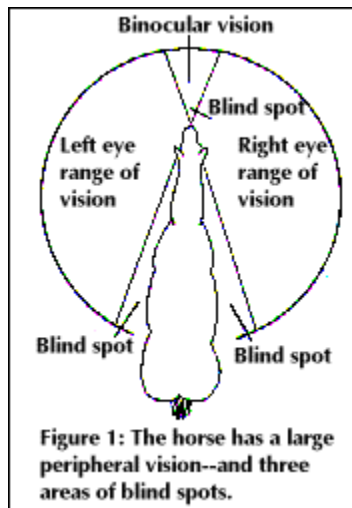
Understanding Horses:

The biggest risk in being around horses occurs when they are frightened. At this time, their only concerns are escape and survival, and people who are in the wrong place at the wrong time can be hurt. Therefore, the easiest way to prevent such accidents is to understand what frightens horses.

Horses are prey animals; in the wild, they are constantly at risk of being eaten. As a result, they have evolved systems of behaviour to help them successfully detect and avoid predators. Specifically, horses are always on the lookout. Their long necks, widely spaced eyes, and mobile ears help them be aware of things all around them. This means that they see things "out of the corner of their eye" much better than humans, whose eyes are on the front of their faces.

Equine ears swivel in all directions, allowing them to hear and locate faraway sounds. These abilities are crucial to horses' survival, because despite their speed, they are not as fast as many of their natural predators.

Early detection is therefore essential.



Having widely-spaced eyes means that the horse's field of peripheral vision is very large (Fig. 1), but it also limits his field of binocular vision (i.e., where he sees with both eyes at once) to a small area directly in front of him. Binocular vision is essential to accurately judge distance and depth. Therefore, most of the things a horse sees are only one-dimensional - and it is difficult for him to know exactly where they are. In terms of the horse's survival, it really doesn't matter - all he has to do is run the other way. But it does mean that horses will often "overreact" to little things behind and beside them.

Equine Body Language:

Take some time to observe horses from a distance, and learn a bit of their body language. When startled, a horse (like all animals) has three typical reactions. Some will show all three in succession; others may show only one in a given situation. If you can recognize these signs, you will be better able to predict and avoid danger.

- First, a horse will usually freeze. This makes him less noticeable to the potential predator, while allowing him to better identify the source. The horse will usually look intently in the direction of the surprising stimulus, with its head up and ears perked. The animal is often very tense, and a second startle may cause it to bolt.
- Second, horses run. Many will freeze momentarily before running, but many may not. Prior to running, a horse may sidestep, spin, rear, or jump, and it is these actions which are particularly likely to injure onlookers.
- Finally, if cornered, horses will fight. Despite their size and power, they are really not ideally suited to warding off predators, lacking weapons such as horns. They can, however, do considerable damage with their hooves and teeth. Never corner a panicked horse.

Approaching a Horse:

In terms of your safety, then, you should be aware that horses are most easily scared by sudden movements or loud noises, particularly outside of the animal's field of binocular vision. Quick movements or loud noises in these areas will trigger fear reactions such as spinning or bolting, and you may get trampled or kicked in the process.

For this reason, avoid approaching horses from the rear or side. Move to the head, giving the animal a chance to see you. Most horses are more used to being approached from the left. Announce your presence and put a hand on the horse's neck or shoulder so he knows where you are. Offer your hand in a closed fist for the horse to smell. Never run up to a horse, throw things toward a horse, or move in a quick or unpredictable manner. Never stand directly behind a horse; he cannot see you well there, and you risk being kicked.

By learning about horses, how they perceive and react to the world, and by adopting a few basic rules of conduct, you can look forward to safe and enjoyable interaction with these beautiful creatures. Let's now consider some specific situations where you may come into close contact with horses:

At A Horse Show:

For many people, a local fair or horse show is their first close-up exposure to horses. Going to a show is a wonderful way to learn more about the different types and uses of equines, to meet people involved in the sports that interest you, and to make contacts that may lead you to riding lessons, or even your first horse. For the competitors, however, a horse show is a serious thing. Behind the scenes at a show can get pretty hectic, and there are risks to both spectators and horses alike. In addition to the basics we have just covered, here are some specific cautions for the horse show environment:

1. Keep children under direct control at all times. Young children are often very excited at seeing horses and other livestock, and many will run up to them, unaware of the risks. By their very nature, children represent those things horses find most frightening: sudden movements and loud noises. Teach your children the correct way to approach animals, always first asking the owner for permission to do so.
2. Leave your dog at home. Dogs that are not used to horses may bark, lunge, or chase. Horses that are not used to dogs may become panicked by such behaviour. Further, summer shows can get hot, making parked cars unsafe for dogs and creating problems with access to water and shade. In addition, having a dog may limit your access to parts of the show grounds (stands, etc), reducing your enjoyment of the event. For the safety of both dogs and horses, leave your pet at home.
3. Be especially careful at ringside. Many outdoor shows have only single ropes or chains defining the showing, and children or dogs could easily dash under these into the ring. Avoid sudden movements such as taking off jackets or shaking out blankets while there is a class in progress.
4. Occasionally horses break free from their handlers at shows, and the call "Loose horse!" will ring out. Perhaps the rider has fallen, or the animal has escaped from its stall. In such situations, some horses wander harmlessly, but more often they become frightened by the activity, the strange environment, and people trying to catch them. Remain calm. Running will only frighten the animal more, and increases your risk of being hurt. Restrain your children, and move slowly towards a solid object, such as a building or tree. Stand still and let those with more experience handle the situation. If the horse runs toward you, stand your ground, make yourself appear large by holding out your arms, and speak to the animal in an authoritative tone. In most cases, it will avoid you.
5. Avoid taking flash photographs while horses are competing in the ring. Flashes of light can startle horses, distracting them from the task at hand and risking injury or collision.
6. Never feed a horse anything without the permission of the owner. Some horses may be on very controlled diets, others may nip; in any case, it is discourteous and potentially dangerous to feed a horse at a show, even if only grass. Never tease a horse with food.
7. For your own safety and comfort, bring a few essentials with you. For outdoor events, remember your sunscreen, sunglasses, hat, and insect repellent. Sturdy footwear will protect you from rough terrain as well as horses' hooves. If you suffer from allergies to animals or dust, be sure to bring appropriate relief with you; horse shows are full of both!



Many horse shows have only single ropes & chains defining the ring, making it easy for children & dogs to dash under.
(Allison Taylor Photo)

While Driving Your Car:

Do you know what to do if, when in your car, you meet a horse being ridden or driven down the road?



Riding on the road requires extreme caution, ideally shared by both riders & drivers.
(Allison Taylor Photo)

This can be a particularly dangerous situation for all concerned: if frightened, the horse may bolt into the oncoming vehicle or jump into a ditch or fence line. The horse may be injured, the rider or driver thrown, or your car damaged.

Your best strategy is to slow to a crawl, keeping to the opposite side of the road. Dim or turn off your headlights, if possible, and turn down your car stereo. If the horse appears particularly nervous, stop and wait for the rider to either enter a laneway or wave you by. Never brake or accelerate suddenly, both of which cause noise and throw up gravel. Spraying gravel will certainly frighten and may even injure the horse. Never, ever

honk the horn. When you are well past the horse, accelerate gradually and be on your way.

Your First Ride:

So, you've decided to take the plunge and learn to ride. Whether at a riding school, a trail riding establishment, or a friend's stable, there are a few basic rules you should follow to ensure a safe and enjoyable first ride.



Correct riding attire is essential to safety around horses.
(Allison Taylor Photo)

1. **Wear a helmet.**

Helmets have saved untold numbers of lives in riding accidents - don't even think of riding without one. If driving is your chosen sport, you should also wear a helmet. Head injuries can occur if you are thrown out of the cart. Make sure the helmet fits snugly, and has a solid chin strap to hold it securely in place. Avoid helmets labeled as "items of apparel", as these have no real protective value. Look instead for a logo indicating approval by a safety or standards organization, such as the Canadian Standards Association or equivalent such as (in the U.S.) the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) or the Safety Equipment Institute (SEI) Bicycle helmets are used by many pleasure riders, who find them cooler than conventional equestrian helmets. As long as they are similarly endorsed by a recognized standards organization, they are a safe alternative.

2. **Wear solid shoes with heels.**

Never ride barefoot, in sandals, or in slip-on shoes such as loafers. Your feet must support you in the stirrups, and flimsy shoes can fall off or get in the way. Heels are important to prevent your foot from going all the way through the stirrup and getting stuck. Sneakers are unacceptable. A lightweight, ankle-high boot with laces is ideal.

3. **Wear comfortable but not overly baggy clothing.**

Tight jeans do not stretch and are uncomfortable to ride in. Very loose clothes can chafe, or catch on fences or tree branches. Sweat pants or exercise tights are a good choice. Men should consider some form of athletic support for their comfort and safety. Don't chew gum (which can be inhaled) and avoid carrying anything in your pockets, such as a wallet (which is uncomfortable) or a pen (which could stab you if you fall).

4. **Check all equipment.**

Before saddling or harnessing, check all equipment to ensure that it is in good condition and free from foreign bodies that may irritate the animal. Do not use equipment that is cracked or frayed, as it may snap during use.

5. **Use good judgement.**

Use your own good judgement and be realistic about your abilities. Do not ride a horse that frightens you. Be patient with the animal and with yourself. Learning to ride or drive a horse is a long-term

prospect, and you will not be able to gallop across fields, jump fences, or rope cattle on your first outing. If you enjoy your first experience, seek out an experienced, qualified instructor and enjoy the process of learning. It is a wonderful adventure.

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