

Camping & Packing with Your Horse: A Veterinarian's Perspective

The most common veterinary emergencies on the trail are colic, wounds (including rope burns), lameness, and "tying up." While accidents happen to even the best-prepared, thinking ahead and knowing the basics can prevent most of these problems. The best approach is always to try to avoid emergencies by ensuring that you and your horses are prepared for the outing in every way. Below are some basic guidelines and tips for avoiding problems and making your equine outing the great experience it should be.

PREPARATION

It is vital that your horse be properly vaccinated for your trip. Travel and camping in a group of horses exposes them to stress and potentially to new disease organisms.

- Horses that have never been vaccinated before must have received the primary series of vaccine early enough before your trip to allow their body time to mount an immune response.
- For horses that have been maintained on a vaccination program in the past, talk to your veterinarian about vaccinating them with a booster at least a month prior to your departure.
- Standard equine vaccines in our area are Eastern and Western Encephalitis, tetanus, West Nile virus, influenza and rhino.
- Strangles has been a problem in some camping areas and boarding stables. Discuss the costs and benefits of this vaccine with your veterinarian. See *also Deciding When to Use "Risk-Based" Vaccines*.

- Camping in the back country implies greater exposure to rabies. For this reason, you should also discuss rabies vaccination with your veterinarian.

OTHER HEALTH REQUIREMENTS

- Horses should be properly dewormed and should have no other health problems.
- Shoeing should be current and appropriate.
- Interstate travel requires proof of a negative Coggins test (negative for equine infectious anemia) and a health certificate. Most states require that this test be dated within the past year. Some states have special requirements.
- Health certificates are generally only good for up to 30 days, again depending on State.
- Get the Coggins test and health certificates taken care of well in advance so that there is not a rush before your trip to get them done.
- In addition, owners of horses in transit often are required to show proof of ownership – hauling or brand inspection papers. Check with your veterinarian to learn the requirements and to be referred to your local livestock inspector, who can provide these to you.

CONDITIONING YOUR HORSE

Physical conditioning of your horse for major trail riding and horse camping is critical to a good experience. You should ideally start any conditioning program at least 4 to 6 weeks prior to the ride. That said, conditioning a horse starting 2 weeks in advance is better than nothing. Your horse should be accustomed to the type of work you will be asking him to do. If the ride will cover miles of steep trail daily for 3 days, then your horse should have ideally experienced similar trail types.

Trail riding 2 to 3 times per week for 30 minutes to an hour

per session can prepare a horse for long trail rides. Adding inclines to your training regimen is a good idea if the trip will involve lots of vertical gain. Ring work can be a substitute for long training rides, but you may need to push the horse a little harder and engage the hind end in the exercises you choose.

Mental conditioning of your horse (and you) is just as important to the enjoyment of your trip as physical conditioning. Address training issues like loading, trailering, tying, catching, and "fear of water" before your trip, rather than on it. This may mean getting some help if you are not able to resolve these problems yourself. If you plan to ride in a group of unfamiliar horses, try to get your horse prepared for this. Horses that are not accustomed to being around strange horses may expend lots of nervous energy just interacting with them. This can add to stress and overexertion.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

- Have a check list of needed items prepared in advance.
- Have a good map and be clear on your destination and camp sites. Give yourself plenty of time to get to your destination and get your camp set up. Procrastinating and rushing (as I always do!) is a sure way to cause a problem.
- Briefly examine your horse before you load up. Is his attitude OK? Are his shoes OK? Does he trot sound in a quick circle to both directions?
- If you are taking a pack animal, you should be knowledgeable in balancing loads and your tack should fit well.
- Check your rig beforehand, including all aspects of your trailer to ensure that it is ready.

Your riding habits on the trail are very important. You should encourage your horse to graze and drink frequently.

Maintain an easy, even pace whenever possible. As you ride, watch for excessive sweating, heavy breathing, or resistance to moving forward. Stop immediately and allow rest if your horse experiences any of these symptoms. Stop periodically, especially during strenuous exertion, and allow your horse to rest until his heart rate comes down. Allow him to eat and drink during this rest time. If his recovery time is slow, be prepared to give him adequate rest periods for the rest of the ride. For pack animals, it is critical to watch the load carefully for imbalance and other problems.

Cool your horse out by walking him quietly over the last couple of miles. This is especially important in cold weather, so that he doesn't get chilled after coming in wet with sweat. In warm weather, give him a bath and scrape him off. Daily, after your ride, you should check for saddle sores, swellings or cuts, especially down low on the legs. Ensure that he can trot soundly in a circle. Ensure that his attitude and appetite are good.

If your horse is fine at the end of the day, and cooled out properly, he can be fed a typical ration. If there is any question, only feed him a light meal. If he is not accustomed to green grass, only give him access to small amounts initially, gradually increasing this over the trip. Always try to avoid sudden major diet changes. Secure your horse for the night in a safe way. This might involve portable corrals, portable electric pen, tying to a picket line, or another method. The important point is that you do it correctly to avoid accidents.

FIRST AID KIT

Talk to your veterinarian about helping you put together a first aid kit for the trail. Here is a list of common items taken on the trail:

- Paste electrolytes. (Talk to your veterinarian about the best one to purchase, as they are not all equal.)

- Basic bandage material.
- Fly repellent ointment or wipe.
- A prescription anti-inflammatory paste and an oral antibiotic on hand for emergencies. Your veterinarian should explain how and when to use these drugs if he or she dispenses them.
- I like to take a collapsible bucket, a small jar of antiseptic soap, a tube of antibiotic eye ointment, and a tube of ointment for rubs and sores. I also carry a disposable shaver and a digital thermometer. I take what I need to reset a shoe if I need to.
- If you are not sure of how and when to use veterinary drugs and supplies, you are better off without them.
- Ensure that any drugs you take are packaged properly so that they are not spilled or broken as the load shifts. You should balance preparing for any emergency with trying to travel as light and simply as possible.

It is preferable to avoid accidents and veterinary emergencies through good preparation and horsemanship rather than to fill your pack with veterinary supplies to cover every potential accident. Have your horses and yourself prepared well, so that you have an enjoyable and less stressful experience.

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