

Horse Owner Self-Help: Knowing When to Call a Veterinarian

Too often I have dealt with cases in which a horse owner or caretaker treated a horse incorrectly for a long period of time. By the time I was asked to help, it was too late. This is sad and needless.

It is often difficult for horse owner's to know whether equine health problems require a veterinarian's attention or can be handled without such intervention. Loaded with products, medications, and unreliable information, many horse owners have become misdirected in treating their horses on their own. This problem is complicated by the fact that horse owners have a wide range of equine first-aid skills and their horses have their own unique predispositions and limitations. While veterinary care may be needed, we all know that it is expensive and sometimes difficult to procure after regular business hours or in remote locations.

The best course for everyone involved – for the horse, the owner, and the veterinarian – is early communication about the problem with your veterinarian. Whether that communication results in an appointment will depend on the severity and type of the problem involved. If a problem can be accurately diagnosed at the outset, an appropriate treatment plan may yield a better prognosis at less cost. More importantly, horses are spared from needless suffering and have the best chance for a rapid and complete recovery when your veterinarian is advised of the problem at the outset.

Some equine health care problems look terrible but generally heal well with minimal care. An example of these is the common disease "Pigeon Breast" (Pigeon Fever). This bacterial infection results in impressive abscesses on the chest and

belly. When horse owners notice these, they often panic and call their veterinarian immediately. This problem can be serious and require some treatment, however it generally isn't an emergency requiring prompt veterinary intervention.

Other conditions tend not to attract attention but can cause devastating problems. A classic example is puncture wounds to joints and tendon sheaths in the limbs. These may appear as nothing more than a tiny crust on the hair over a joint. It may seem strange that the horse can hardly walk, but that tiny puncture introduced bacteria into the tendon sheath and there is a raging, closed bacterial infection of the sheath that is a painful and crippling problem. Aggressive surgical flushing of the tendon sheath and intense antibiotic therapy is required in to attempt to treat the problem, and each day that this condition progresses untreated means a smaller likelihood that the horse will ever be sound again.

ORIGIN OF THE PROBLEM

I think that ultimately all of those involved want what is best for their horse. Why then do horse owners tend to treat problems themselves instead of calling their veterinarian?

- **INFORMATION OVERLOAD.** Horse owners are inundated with information on do-it-yourself veterinary care. This problem has worsened because of the unlimited information available to horse people on the Internet, much of which is unreliable.
- **PRODUCTS.** We are a society that prizes a "Silver Bullet" cure for our ills. Similarly, horse owners tend to believe in products that claim to yield miracles. There is little to no regulation on the animal supplement and product industry. Most of the supplements that claim remarkable feats of healing are not supported by any credible evidence regarding their effectiveness. Billions of dollars are nevertheless spent annually on these products.

- **OPINIONS.** One thing that is never in short supply in the equine world is opinions, and usually you get what you pay for. With good intentions, feed store staff, equestrian retailers, horse owning friends and neighbors sometimes provide medication and erroneous information to horse owners instead of referring them to their veterinarian for reliable information and education.
- **The VETERINARY PROFESSION** also is partly to blame. We need to put more effort into educating horse owners and getting them to see that treatment of veterinary problems is more complicated than a single shot of some magic potion. Clients often pressure veterinarians to provide drugs to them in case they have a problem. There is often not adequate communication between client and their veterinarian regarding the correct use of the drug. Medications are sometimes used inappropriately, often to the detriment of the horse. Laws require veterinarians to dispense prescription medications only when they have a valid VCPR "Veterinary Client Patient Relationship."
- **ECONOMICS.** Horse ownership is expensive and getting more expensive all the time. Veterinary care is costly. Many horse owners seek ways to minimize expense at every opportunity and it is their perception that saving on veterinary care is a good way to do this. Their perception is that by waiting and trying to treat the problem themselves, they are saving money. This gamble can cost more in the long run and may cost the horse's life. See *Understanding the Rising Costs of Equine Veterinary Care*, for tips on how to reduce your veterinary bills while still providing appropriate care to your horse.

A VETERINARIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

Your equine veterinarian is dedicated to the health of horses and the education of horse owners. Most veterinarians enjoy

helping clients solve their equine health problems in the smartest and most economical way possible. The best way for me to accurately diagnose and treat a horse is by examining it first-hand. That said, I realize this is not always possible. I need to be able to filter what should be seen by me from what I think clients can treat themselves. In order to make this call, I need to know and trust my clients.

I only provide prescription medications to established clients who I think have the good judgment to realize when they are in over their heads. Clients like this have knowledge, common sense, and a willingness to place more importance on their horse's health than on their ego. I appreciate clients communicating with me about their horse's health care issues early in the process and while there is still possibility to help the horse. I want the opportunity to help determine early on whether or not the horse needs to be seen. In some cases, after a careful discussion with these clients about the problem, I am willing to provide guidance over the phone, without seeing the horse and without the client incurring the expense of a visit. In these cases, follow-up is vital to ensure that the outcome of treatment is as expected.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Develop a relationship of mutual trust and respect with your veterinarian. Call him or her early in the course of a problem, even one that is seemingly minor. A call to your veterinarian does not necessarily mean a big bill, and can set you on the right course of treatment early on. Learn as much as you can about horse health care, from basic management to the ability to recognize common health problems. This saves you money by allowing you to communicate intelligently with your veterinarian, by giving them important information. This includes learning how to examine your horse. If you know what your horse looks like in health, you are in a better position to tell when he or she is abnormal and share these findings with your veterinarian. At minimum, learn to competently take

your horse's take temperature, pulse and respiration.

Beware of erroneous information, and question alternative therapies and expensive "Silver Bullet" cures and supplements, especially when they are offered before you know what is actually wrong with your horse. Start with your veterinarian, instead of the fancy cures. Your veterinarian can then help direct you to sources of reliable information and effective products and services.

Take advantage of our remarkable modern technology. An example of this is e-mailing a digital photo and description of a wound to your veterinarian so that he or she can help determine whether your horse needs to be seen.

Given all of the resources available to horse owners today, there is no reason for horses to suffer while owners treat them unsuccessfully for extended periods of time. Veterinarians should not be called out as a last ditch effort, only to tell a client that the problem is now beyond treatment.

By Douglas O. Thal DVM Dipl. ABVPBoard Certified in Equine PracticeThal Equine LLCLast Updated August 2011