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## **Safety at Horse Shows and Equine Events**

It's that time of year again... the upcoming show season is just around the corner! Whether you are getting ready to attend your first show or you are a seasoned professional, everyone is at risk for safety hazards that can occur at horse shows and events. Safe horsemanship should be practiced every day so that it will come naturally when faced with the stress of competing. With the excitement and hectic environment of the competition, and so many horses and people all in one place, the potential for accidents and injury seems unavoidable. Or is it? Yes, horseback riding is an inherently dangerous sport and horses are unpredictable, but with proper preparation and common sense, many safety hazards can be avoided. Over 120,000 injuries occur each year at horse shows and other equine events, but following basic safety guidelines can reduce these risks. It is important to consider safety precautions for both the horse and rider, while show and event managers have the responsibility to provide a safe environment.

### **Safety Guidelines for Horses**

Keeping your horse safe includes protection from transmittable diseases, proper nutrition, care, and handling. Before you plan to travel to a show or event, make sure your horse has had a Coggins test within 12 months. Coggins tests are proof the horse is negative for equine infectious anemia (EIA) and the original paper sent from your veterinarian (not a photo copy) must be presented to show or event management. Horses should also receive regular health care including vaccinations. The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) recommends core vaccinations for all horses (tetanus, rabies, west nile virus (WNV), and eastern/western equine encephalomyelitis (EEE/WEE). Horses that are exposed to others at horse shows and events should also receive risk based vaccinations including equine influenza, herpesvirus (rhinopneumonitis) and strangles. When developing a vaccination program it is important to consult with your veterinarian because risks vary depending on geographic location, the population of horses and the individual horse. Interstate travel and some equine events may also require a health certificate from a veterinarian. If traveling out of state, check with the state veterinarian's office to see if there are any specific requirements. In addition to vaccinations, proper farrier and dental care should be provided regularly. When you arrive at a show or event, take note of the contact information for the veterinarian and farrier on call or on-site.

Traveling to shows and events with your horse can provide the greatest risks for injury, but if safety precautions are taken, those risks can be minimized. First, it is important to make sure the horse loads and unloads safely in the particular trailer you are hauling in. A good rule of thumb is to make sure the trailer provides an additional 10 inches above the height in which a horse naturally holds its head, and 3 inches of movable space on either side of its body. A trailer that is 7' to 7'6" tall and 6' to 6'8" wide with 10 to 11' stall length will fit most horses. It is essential

before hitting the road to do a complete safety check of the tow vehicle and trailer and make sure they are both up to date on inspection.

When traveling with your horse and while you are at the event or show, it is important to maintain the horse's normal feeding regiment. Horses require 10 to 20 gallons of water per day but they often do not drink well when traveling or when offered water that tastes different to them. Dehydration can be a serious issue so it's a good idea to bring some water from home that the horse is accustomed to. For longer periods of time when it's not practical to carry water, the horse can be slowly acclimated by adding water from home with new water, or flavouring can be added. It is also important to maintain the horse's normal feeding schedule and do not change the type of feed when traveling. Changes in feed should be made gradually over several weeks to avoid digestive disorders. White salt should be offered free choice and will also encourage the horse to drink. Small white salt blocks or loose salt are easy to travel with and can be fed in buckets easily.

Once you have arrived and the horse is settling in, it's a good idea to acclimate the horse to its new surroundings gradually. It's never a good idea to arrive late to the show or event and expect the horse to go in the ring or behave perfectly without first getting to relax and warm up properly. Give yourself plenty of time to hand walk the horse if the journey was long, after all, showing and traveling to new places is stressful for horses too. If the horse is known to kick, whether you are in the show ring or on a trial ride, tie a red ribbon in its tail. A red ribbon in the tail is the universal practice to let others know the horse may kick and to give the horse plenty of room.

### **Safety Guidelines for Riders**

The most important safety precaution a rider can take is to wear a properly fitted ASTM/SEI approved equestrian helmet. It may not be fashionable within some disciplines or breed shows, but fashion and tradition should never be more important than saving your life. Each year over 120,000 riders are treated by emergency rooms and head injuries account for 60% of deaths resulting from equestrian accidents. Properly fitted ASTM/SEI certified helmets can prevent death and reduce the severity of head injuries sustained from riding. Judges and horse show organizations should not fault a rider for wearing a helmet and all riders, regardless of age or experience, should wear helmets. Helmet fashion has come a long way in recent years and there is a helmet out there everyone! It is also important to wear appropriate footwear when riding and working around horses. Sturdy footwear like boots are best, and if riding, the boots should have a heel. The rider's attire should always fit properly, be comfortable and not impede the ability to mount and dismount safely. Tack and equipment should be maintained and cleaned regularly.

Make sure halters, lead ropes, saddles, bridles, girths etc. are the correct size for the horse. Thoroughly clean and inspect all tack at home for abnormal wear. Girths, stirrup leathers and stirrups should especially be strong and free from wear.

If using stabling areas, inspect the stalls and surrounding area and get everything set up before the horse(s) arrive. Check for safety hazards including exposed electrical wires or outlets, nails,

loose boards etc. If it is hot and fans are used, make sure all electrical wires are out of reach of the horse and are secure. Use caution on concrete floors and keep aisles open and free from debris.

It's a good practice to teach horses to tie at home. It is often necessary to tie horses at shows and events. Never tie a horse to unsafe or unstable objects and always use a safety knot such as the quick release. Tying and cross-tying horses in aisles should be avoided as it can be hazardous and inconsiderate to others who may need to pass by. It is preferable to groom and tack up the horse in a stall or designate a grooming stall where the horse can be cross-tied. When tacking up, always be careful that the horse is in control and cannot get loose. If it is necessary to tack up at the trailer always be sure to keep the horse in control (ex. loop the lead rope around the neck when bridling) and never tie a horse to an unhitched trailer.

The warm up area can be the most dangerous place at any show or event. Riders and horses of all skill levels are often schooling in the same area and it is important to keep your eyes up and watch out for others. Less experienced riders should have an instructor or someone with experience assist them at horse shows and events, especially in the warm up area.

When competing, it's smart to enter classes or events at the appropriate level. Entering a level below what the rider and horse are capable of at home decreases nerves and increases confidence. Allow plenty of time to acclimate the horse to its new environment. Don't overwork the horse before the show or event. If you haven't mastered something at home, the show ring is not the place. Always be considerate of others and practice good sportsmanship. If you see a horse with a red ribbon its tail, give the horse plenty of room.

### **Safety Guidelines for Horse Show and Event Managers**

It is the responsibility of the show and event management to create a safe environment for horses and people. Having knowledgeable and pleasant staff and judges will reduce stress and the potential for accidents. When using volunteers at shows that may be less experienced, team them up with someone who is more knowledgeable at the task they are asked to do until they become comfortable on their own. It is important that all show staff be on the lookout for safety issues and report anything potentially dangerous to the show manager.

The show manager should do a walk-through of the grounds prior to, and throughout the event or show, to identify and correct any potential problems. Banner and loose items that may spook horses should be avoided. Equine activity liability warning signs **must** be posted and clearly visible at all equine shows and events in order to have protection under Tennessee law. These signs can be purchased at most tack shops and farm supply stores. The warning notice shall appear on the sign in black letters, with each letter to be a minimum of one inch (1") in height as follows:

## WARNING

Under Tennessee Law, an equine professional is not liable for an injury to or the death of a participant in equine activities resulting from the inherent risks of equine activities, pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 44, Chapter 20.

It is also the management's responsibility to obtain Emergency Medical Personnel for people and horses. It is recommended to contact local emergency medical service and have EMTs on site during show or event operating hours. If it is not possible to hire EMTs, a plan should be in place with local emergency medical care providers should an accident or emergency occur. A licensed veterinarian should also be identified and secured before the show or event. If the veterinarian cannot be at the show for the duration, he or she should be "on-call" with the phone number available to exhibitors. A farrier is also good to have on the grounds or on-call.

Accidents at horse shows and events happen all too often despite the show managers diligence to safety. Protect yourself and your organization by purchasing sufficient insurance coverage. Show and event facilities should carry insurance as well, and all parties need to be clear on the policies and coverage.

Show managers should make sure the arena size and gates are appropriate for the event or discipline. Different size arenas are required for different disciplines. Gates should be wide enough to accommodate horses and riders with plenty of room on each side. If panel gates, such as those often used at cattle events with a cross brace at the top, they should be tall enough. A rider should never have to duck through a gate. It is also a safety concern that the arena footing consists of the appropriate material, depth and cushion for the discipline. Having the appropriate equipment to work the arena properly is essential. Dogs should be prohibited or discouraged from the grounds and particularly the arena area. Some horses are afraid of dogs and can cause the horse to spook. If dogs are allowed, they should be kept on leashes and away from horses.

Misconduct can be a concern at all shows and events, so there needs to be a plan in place to address security issues. While it is the rider's responsibility to lock up tack and valuables, security should be on-site or on-call should misconduct occur. Shows and events also must accommodate spectators. There should be designated areas for spectators and allow plenty of space for warm up and staging areas.

Weather can also present safety issues, especially during the spring and summer months. Have a backup plan to relocate or delay if weather threatens safety. If there is lightning the show must be stopped. Provide shade and cool areas during extreme heat and humidity.

### **Safety is Everyone's Responsibility**

While these guidelines provide the basics of a safe and successful show or event, common sense and preparation are the keys to safety. Riders, trainers, parents, and owners, as well as show management all have a responsibility to ensure a safe show or event. It is easy to get wrapped up

in the hectic environment horse shows and events present, but don't let it get in the way of safety. Slow down, think ahead, and remember, showing horses is supposed to be fun!

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