

VET-PROOFING YOUR HORSES

By Sarah Fryer, DVM

Having been a veterinarian for nearly 15 years now, I can honestly say I love my job. Yes, we have sad times when dealing with patients at the end of their lives, but these moments are more than made up for by the wonderful feeling of being able to help animals in need and seeing them and their owners happy again. However, we also have some very frustrating times when we want to help, but the patient doesn't want to cooperate!

In some cases, especially with horses, pain from sickness or injury makes them scared and the natural instincts of fright and flight come into play. However all too often I have to deal with a completely healthy and pain free horse that just won't stand still because what I am doing is completely new. Even some well trained competition horses will react dramatically when I approach to insert a thermometer in their anus! Let's face it. You would too if you didn't understand it was necessary and wasn't going to hurt. This is where you can help your veterinarian and your horse, and make your horse generally safer for all around it.

Let me go through some common situations that we face, and some ideas of how you can teach your horse to accept them. It is much easier to do this when your horse is at home, healthy and working with someone it knows compared to an emergency situation where you and your horse are stressed and surrounded by strangers.

When first trying these exercises, please make sure you have a competent person holding the horse. If your horse reacts and does not respond to your basic corrections, or if at any time you find

yourself scared, then it is time to get professional help. (Please note that the horse in the following photographs has already been trained to accept all we are demonstrating, and is tied in a safe manner with a quick release clip.)

1. Standing still to have its heart, lungs and gut sounds listened to.

This might sound so basic, but stop and think about it: apart from when you are grooming your horse, how often does he have a stranger come up on his off (right) side and put a strange object on it? In your basic ground training, practice this with friends and strangers while you hold the horse. If you don't already have a basic stethoscope, purchase one and ask your veterinarian to show you how to check heart rate and gut sounds. Most of us love our horse owners to be able to give us this information when they call us about a sick horse. The horse should stand quietly and relaxed, and almost all will, once they get over the fear of the strange "snake" approaching them.

2. Allowing their lips to be parted for examination of their gums.

Gum colour and the speed at which blood returns to them after applying pressure (capillary refill time) provide vital information in sick horses, especially in the case of colic. Work at getting your horse to accept you handling his muzzle, and then gently parting the front lips and holding them apart for at least 30 seconds. Since most owners only do this when they are about to do something unpleasant, many horses will fight, toss their heads, and even pull back or rear. Work at this gradually with a competent handler so that you are not having to hold the horse and manipulate the lips at the same time. Make a habit of doing

this every time you groom your horses and they will soon accept that it is no big deal.



Inspecting gums: your horse should get used to having his lips held apart to check his gums. This also becomes useful when we are doing dental exams.

3. Checking their eyes.

Veterinarians use the white part of the eye to check for jaundice, and we can only see this by parting the eyelids. In cases of eye discharge we also need to check for foreign bodies, such as grass seeds, under the lids, including the third eyelid – that membrane that is in the inside corner of your horse's eyes. Again, with someone holding your horse, work on getting it to accept you rubbing all around the eye and then carefully place your finger on the upper lid and your thumb on the lower lid, apply firm pressure, and spread the lids apart. Don't worry if that third eyelid starts to push outwards: that is completely normal as your horse will retract its eyeball slightly to protect it from injury.

Your horse will resist to start with, but with repetition should become calm and stand still with its head lowered. You will be pleased you taught this if you ever have an eye injury that your veterinarian asks you to treat several times a day.



Examining the eye: notice the position of the fingers to allow the lids to be spread apart. Work with your horse until he is relaxed and holding still for at least a count of 10 seconds.

4. Checking their ears.



Examining the inside of the ear: notice how relaxed this horse is and how he keeps his head low.

Again, this sounds simple but many horses just never have it done. Once you get them to accept you touching then rubbing

their ears, start taking one side of the ear in each hand to turn it partially inside out.

5. Testing their hooves for tender areas.

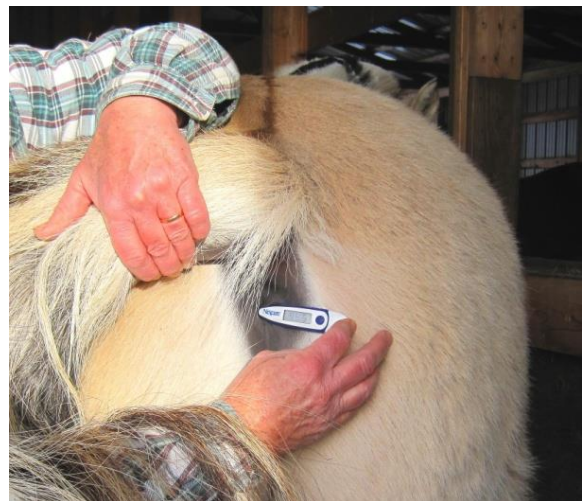


Tapping the sole of the hoof: again the horse should be relaxed and not pull his foot away each time you tap with the hammer.

I would hope that you all have your horses trained to stand still and hold their feet up for regular cleaning and for your farrier to trim them. If they are shod, then they will already be used to the sensation of hammering, however if they are barefoot, this may be new to them. Veterinarians often use a small hammer to identify painful areas, and this relies on the horse being relaxed and calm when it doesn't hurt, but reacting when we hit the sore spot. Sounds simple – but not if the horse panics at the first tap of a hammer because it has never experienced it before! Every time you pick his feet out make a habit of tapping the hoof-pick on the soles. Go one step further by having a small hammer and using this on all areas of the sole until your horse accepts it without pulling his foot away, even slightly.

6. Accepting a thermometer in his anus.

My heart always speeds up when I take out my thermometer to check the temperature on a horse that I don't know. It races even faster when that horse has already objected to other parts being touched during my physical exam. I wish I had a dollar for every owner that tells me “don't worry, he has never kicked anyone” and then had the horse lift a leg threateningly as I gently try and lift his tail. Usually even these horses will accept me if I take plenty of time and everyone is relaxed – but often we don't have time and everyone around is stressed and wound up dealing with an injury. Some horses get so wound up that we are unable to get that vital information without risk of injury.



Holding the thermometer: stand in a safe position and hold pressure on the end of the thermometer to press the other end against the rectal wall.

Once again, think about it – unless your horse is used to having a crupper on him in harness, he will not routinely have had anyone touch the underside of its tail, let alone his anus!

Please work with your horse in its basic ground training to accept you lifting his tail and touching around his anus. Stand close against the rump facing away from the head (this way if you do get cow kicked you are

less likely to hyperextend your knee). Make sure you have a competent handler holding the horse and standing on the same side so that if it does react and doesn't respond to your correction and instruction to stand still, the handler can move the horse's head towards you and thus its hind legs away.



Touching around the anus: notice the position I am standing in to be as safe as possible should the horse react.

Most horses will clamp their tails down tight the first time you try and lift it. Simply talk to them and maintain gentle pressure until they relax and lift it. If they have reacted at all, stop once they relax for the tail lift on your first session. If they cow kick, panic or buck, then make sure you get some help from an experienced horse trainer before you go further.

Once your horse allows you to lift and move its tail around, use your other hand to gently touch (not tickle) around the anus. Again, the first time the horse may react, but most actually relax and seem to enjoy this as much as being scratched anywhere else on their bodies.

Finally, when the horse is totally relaxed insert a thermometer lubricated with KY jelly into the anus. I prefer the digital thermometers designed for children that have a flexible tip. Hold it in place, and if the horse has accepted the touching around the anus, it will almost certainly just stand there. Remember we sometimes have to hold a thermometer in for at least a minute, so slowly work up to this with your horse.

Getting an accurate temperature requires the tip of the thermometer to be against the wall of the rectum (not in the middle of a poop ball), so put gentle sideways pressure on the end in your hand to press the tip to one side. When you are done, take care to remove the thermometer slowly, gently release the tail and talk to the horse as you move away to the side, not directly around the back of your horse.

So I hope you will all spend some time working with your horses to get them used to all the above parts of a veterinary exam. The majority of animals that have already had basic training should accept everything described in just a couple of sessions.

You might, however, be surprised to find one or more little "phobias" you never realised your horse has. It is much better to discover this now, rather than when your veterinarian is working on your horse for the first time. Some training now will not only make you more popular with your veterinarian, but may also save you money. All too often we have to resort to tranquilizers to do a job that on a well-mannered horse can be done easily, and of course, you will get charged accordingly, as well as for the extra time your veterinarian has to spend with you.



Editor's note: Sarah is a vet at the Lac Ste. Anne Veterinary Services in Gunn, Alberta, and a Fjord owner.