

Horse Safety Tips

Seeing a horse up close for the first time is a breathtaking experience. Not only are they beautiful, but they're also one of the largest creatures we get to interact with on a regular basis. Because they are so large and powerful, there are important safety tips that everyone should know before approaching or riding a horse.

So, how can you stay safe around horses? Here are some safety tips.

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1. Stay Alert

One of the best horse safety tips is to stay alert when you're around them. As you're around horses more and more, you'll be able to sense when something isn't quite right. But even if you're a beginner, your instincts can be a helpful indicator as to when a situation isn't safe. If you feel like a situation isn't safe, remove yourself from the situation and get the assistance of someone with more experience.

Staying alert not only to the horse but also your surroundings will help you to see potential situations that your horse may react to. Whether it's something that may cause your horse to spook, like a bag blowing in the breeze or a noisy truck coming down the road, being alert to what's going on around you will help you maintain your safety.

2. Make Your Presence Known

Horses are, by nature, flight animals. That means that they are instinctively ready to flee at any given time. If you're not making your presence known and manage to surprise a horse, it could be potentially dangerous for you and the horse.

One of the worst things you can do to a horse is sneak up on it. Make your presence known by speaking in your regular tone as you approach. You should also make sure that the horse sees you coming. A horse that knows that you are approaching it is far less likely to kick, bite, or run away in fright.

3. Avoid Danger Areas

Many beginners are tentative around horses and pull away from a horse whenever there is any sign of danger. But what many don't know is that the safest place to be is directly beside a horse's front shoulder rather than a few feet away from them. Standing several feet away from a horse puts you in a good position for a full powered horse kick. When you stand just beside their front shoulder, they aren't able to gather the same amount of momentum to carry out a powerful kick.

The worst possible places to stand near a horse are directly in front of it, where you can be trampled if they bolt forwards, or behind it, where they can easily deliver a powerful kick.

It's good to note that horses actually have a blind spot directly in front of them. If you happen to be in that blind spot when they get spooked, it could be a bad situation. Horses also have a blind spot directly behind them, making approaching them from behind particularly dangerous. If you do ever need to cross behind a horse, the safest way to do so is to stay close to their body, keeping one hand on them as you move around so that they know where you're located.

The rule to remember here is to always stand beside their front shoulder or far enough away that you're out of reach for a kick.

4. Approach the Horse from the Side

The safest way to approach a horse is at an angle from the side where they can clearly see you. Because of the blind spots that horses have directly in front of them and behind them, avoid approaching from either of these angles. When you do so, they might not know you're coming until the last second. Speak calmly as you approach to help ensure that they are well aware of your presence.

5. Watch for Warning Signs

Horses give warning signs when they're about to do something unusual like kicking or biting. Knowing these signs will help you stay safe in otherwise hazardous situations. Horses kick or bite when they feel afraid or defensive. One of the clearest signs that a horse is upset is when they lay their ears flat on their head. This is known as pinning their ears. If a horse you're around does this, exercise extreme caution as they might be about to kick or bite.

Other signs of an uncomfortable horse include rapidly swivelling ears, as though they are trying to listen to noises all around them, excessive tail swishing, and a slightly lowered head that is moved from side to side.

A great way to tell what a horse is feeling is to notice the expression in their eyes. If a horse is nervous, they'll be wide-eyed. If a horse is calm and relaxed, their eyes will be half-closed and they may chew their teeth contently.

6. Avoid Surprises

While surprises might be fun for us, horses are a bit less fond of them. Things that we might not even think twice about can really startle a horse. A few examples are running, loud or strange noises, foreign objects like plastic bags, unexpected physical contact, things that resemble snakes, and the wind.

Like mentioned above, horses are creatures of flight. If they are surprised by something, they'll naturally want to run away. If you don't know how to handle a horse when they're spooked or surprised, this could be a potentially dangerous situation for you, the athlete or the horse.

7. Ask Permission Before Going Near Someone's Horse

You should always ask permission before approaching someone's horse. For one, this is the polite thing to do. But secondly, they might respond negatively to physical contact from anyone that they haven't established trust with yet.

The horse could also be dealing with other physical or psychological issues that you're not aware of. It's always best to exercise caution by asking the horse's owner before approaching.

Do not offer treats or feed another person's horse.

8. Stay Calm

If you've heard anything about horses, you've likely heard that horses can pick up on your emotions when you're around them, and this is certainly true.

9. Wear the Right Clothing

If you want to stay safe around horses, the type of clothing you wear will play an important role. Wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt and closed-toed, sturdy shoes.

Loose clothing, thongs, sandals or high heels should not be worn.

10. Exercise Caution Around Ropes

Ropes play an important role with horses, but they can also be dangerous in certain situations. If a horse is tied off, you should never step under or over the rope that is securing them.

11. Avoid Sitting Down Around Horses

Horses, like any animal, are never one hundred percent predictable, so you need to be ready to respond to any situation that might occur.

12. Stay Out of Tight Spaces

Horses are incredibly strong. So strong that they can potentially injure you by accident by pressing you against the wall of a trailer, stall, riding ring, or any other immovable object. You should always avoid putting yourself between a horse and a hard place.

13. Close Gates Behind You

An easy mistake to make is forgetting to close and secure gates all the way, but this is something that should be avoided at all costs. If a gate is left open, horses will be able to make their way to places that aren't safe, like busy roads and neighbourhoods.

It's good to form the habit of double checking that gates are securely closed whenever you're entering or leaving an area.

Damaged, misplaced, and wrongly sized gear can all place you and your horse in danger, so do your due diligence before you ride to make sure there won't be any gear related issues.

14. Red Ribbons –Maintaining Proper Following Distance

Some horses don't take kindly to anything coming up behind them. This includes people, other horses and vehicles.

Always be sure to make your presence known if you're coming up behind another horse and rider. If you need to pass, you can say "left, please," or "right, please" so they know where you're coming from and where they need to move over to give you space.

A red ribbon in a horse's tail is the universal sign throughout the horse world that this horse kicks. Stay away from the back end of any horse with a red ribbon in its tail.

15. Green Disc = Stallion

A green disc displayed anywhere on a horse indicates that the horse is a stallion (a male, ungelded horse). Never approach a stallion unless directly invited to by the owner. Maintain additional distance from all stallions.

The float, truck or stable of a stallion may also display a green disc or signage to indicate the presence of a stallion.

Scan the code for a digital version of these tips.

