

## **Safe Horse-Handling Techniques**

R. D. Scoggins, D.V.M.  
Equine Extension Veterinarian  
University of Illinois

Horses are large, reactive athletes. They can seriously harm people when trying to escape a perceived danger. Horses and humans don't see the world in the same fashion. As a result, situations that humans don't see as dangerous could appear very frightening to a horse.

Horses are naturally claustrophobic (fearful of tight places). Their eyesight is designed to detect motion or potential danger, and they are afraid of sudden movement. Horses are also neophobic—afraid of new things or new situations. Because of horses' phobias, humans need to be alert and aware around horses all of the time. The horse doesn't jump on you because it's being silly; often it's because the horse's natural instinct overrides its learned respect for the human.

Always carry a rope or rope and halter when you are around horses. When the horses become accustomed to seeing it, they don't only associate a rope with being caught.

Because most horses are handled primarily from the left side, it is usually safest to approach horses from the left side. When two people are grooming or tacking or doing another procedure on a horse, it is best for them both to be on the same side. Then, if the horse is startled, it can move away from both without running over anyone.

Approach horses at an angle between their head and shoulder—not straight towards their face. Rub the neck, and then place the halter or rope

around the neck. Teach the horse to lower its head and allow you to tip the head and neck to the horse's left. If you are not standing directly in front of the horse, the horse is less likely to run over you if something startles it.

Avoid tying horses and especially avoid crossties until you have received specific instructions and are sure the horse is foolproof to tie. Tying horses should be done with equipment that won't break—tie it higher than its withers to something that won't break or move. If a horse is frightened and breaks loose, it may never again be dependable to tie solidly the rest of its life.

Horses that tie well, lead well. If a horse won't lead up on a loose line with little or no pressure, don't expect it to tie. Teach the horse to lead freely first.

Windy weather, concrete floors, or a hard surface, especially if the horse is shod, will increase the risk of a horse becoming nervous. If other horses in a group become upset or restless, the herd instinct tends to cause them all to become restless or upset. Handle the horse so that it wants to trust and respect the human. It will gradually learn to ignore what's going on around it.

Horses should be tacked up (saddled and bridled) on a surface with good footing. A hard surface (concrete) increases the risk of the horse panicking if it slips, swells up against the girth, or is being troublesome to bridles. A tight cinch and hard slick footing is an invitation to a wreck. The horse may flip over backwards or rear and buck because the slipping frightens it.

Lead horses with some length and slack in the lead. The horse needs to pay attention to the leader and where both are going. It is work! If the horse is attentive, it will be less reactive to other stimuli in the environment. The

better horses handle on a lead line, the better they will ride. The two don't seem connected, but they are.

When leading horses over grass, don't allow them to graze. Horses that eat grass on a lead line soon start doing it when ridden. They also start leading the leader by dragging them to where the grass is. Get in the habit that when the halter and lead or the bridle is on, eating is not allowed.

When riding, be sure tack fits. Ill-fitting bits or bridles cause horses to toss their heads and fight the bit. Loose cinches allow saddles to slip and may cause a fall. If the saddle slides under the horses' belly, it may result in a real wreck and cause the horse to be unsafe in the future.

Horsemanship is an athletic event and should be coached/taught like any other sport. Because of the risk of injury, riding should be supervised by someone experienced and skillful at handling horses. Safety equipment, including helmets and boots, should be used. Riding in sneakers is dangerous.

More serious injuries occur from falls from a horse's back than from all other athletic activities combined. Serious head injuries and broken limbs are too common.

Most handling techniques are better demonstrated than described. Numerous videos and clinics are available that show safe horse-handling methods. View and discuss these; then, pair off and practice with a partner. Trade off and critique each other until practicing safety becomes a habit. Happy trails.