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FIRST AID FOR WOUNDS

Horses and ponies often receive cuts and other wounds, particularly on their face and legs. Many require just simple first aid measures, while others require the attention of your veterinarian. Simple first aid measures can help reduce the risk of infection or further damage.

Basic First Aid Kit

Your first aid kit should contain the following items:

- Sterile non-stick dressings (10 x 10 cm or 10 x 20 cm sizes)
- Roll cotton or Gamgee roll
- Bandaging materials, including self adhesive sticky and non-sticky bandages
- Spare clean stable bandage
- Small bottle of disinfectant, such as Betadine
- Bandage scissors
- Wound poultice dressing
- Antibiotic wound spray and/or wound powder

What should I do first?

If your horse has sustained a cut or wound the most important thing to do is to stop the bleeding. This can be done by applying direct pressure to the wound using a clean piece of Gamgee or cotton, either held or bandaged in place until the bleeding has stopped or your veterinarian has arrived. Tourniquets should be avoided because of the risk of causing thromboses (blood clots) in the veins and arteries. If there is foreign material protruding from the wound, pressure should be applied immediately above and around the wound. This can be done by hand or where possible by creating a ring of bandaging material so that pressure can be applied to the surrounding area without applying any more pressure to the foreign body. If this is small and can safely be removed, it is best removed. Always tell your veterinarian if you have removed a foreign body, and keep it examination.



**A freshly stitched
knee wound**

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If an artery or vein has been cut, it may take 20 minutes to half an hour for bleeding to stop. In some cases of arterial bleeding, this cannot be stopped until the artery has been clamped or tied off by a veterinarian and in such cases it is important to continue to apply pressure until he or she arrives. If a bandaged wound bleeds through the bandage, apply a second bandage on top of it, wrapping as tightly as you can. DO NOT remove the original bandage. Once bleeding has stopped or if the wound has not bled excessively it should be cleaned to reduce the risk of infection. Be gentle and careful not to restart the bleeding. Liberal hosing with cold water is effective at flushing off dirt and debris and helping to minimize swelling and inflammation. The cold water also helps to stem bleeding.

If the wound is in an amenable area, a non-stick dressing should be applied, covered with a piece of cotton and a clean shipping wrap. If the wound is large or deep, or if there has been extensive bleeding, this is an emergency and your veterinarian should be called immediately. While waiting for your veterinarian the wound should be left covered where possible. Wounds on the upper limbs, body and head, not amenable to bandaging, should just be cleaned and left open or continually cold-hosed. DO NOT apply wound powder or ointment just in case the wound needs stitching. Some improvisation may be called for in the presence of large skin flaps such as those which may occur on the abdomen or upper limb. With these wounds it may be necessary to try to use clean towels or sheets held in place with bandaging materials just to try to prevent further damage occurring to the skin and underlying tissues.

Which types of wounds need stitching?



Wound on a cannon

Wounds which penetrate the full thickness of the skin or deeper, wounds on the nostrils, lips and eyelids, wounds where a flap of skin has been created and wounds where underlying tissues have been exposed should always be seen by a veterinarian as in most instances they will require suturing. Small wounds however, even if full thickness can very often be left unsutured, but need to be cleaned and examined. If your horse has a wound that you think may require suturing, it is important to call your veterinarian as soon as possible. Wounds sutured within 4 hours of occurrence tend to heal much more successfully than those that are repaired later, after the tissues have started to dry out. When sutured later, wounds may have already developed a considerable amount of swelling and possibly infection, and are therefore less amenable to suturing and are more susceptible to the development of complications.

Small skin wounds on the lower legs of horses are often best left unsutured. In some cases, such wounds are partially sutured, leaving the lower aspect of the wound open to drain into the bandage. Some wounds require hospitalization where the wound can be very carefully and thoroughly cleaned, prepared and sutured under general anesthetic, followed by expert wound dressing and bandaging. Decisions on wound management should be made on the basis of the individual wound, horse and owner aspirations. Significant advances have been made in the treatment of equine wounds over the last few years.

Wounds over joints, tendon sheaths and penetrating body cavities

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Wounds involving joints and tendon sheaths are always potentially life-threatening as infection in these structures can be extremely difficult to resolve even if treated very quickly. Inflammatory responses can result in joint surface or sheath membrane damage and, with associated infections, can cause long term or permanent incapacity. If unsure whether a wound has penetrated a joint or sheath, your veterinarian may wish to take a sample of joint or sheath fluid to test the cell count and the appearance of the cell types to determine if the joint or sheath will require flushing. The sooner this is done following injury, the better are the chances for a successful recovery. Often, radiographs are required to make sure that there are no fractures or foreign bodies.

Similarly, penetrating wounds into the chest and abdomen may cause immediate death or serious life-threatening complications. Wounds into the chest affect a horse's ability to breath and will result in the development of pleuropneumonia. Penetrating wounds into the abdominal cavity will result in the development of peritonitis and may cause damage to any of the internal organs. These cases, if resolvable, will need intensive treatment.