DRESSAGE, EVENTING, HUNTERS, JUMPERS VOL. 11

PRACTICAL HORSEMAN EXTRA

PICK THE BEST PACE FOR YOUR COURSES

10 ACTION TIPS FOR EQUINE HEALTH CRISES

Kristy Herrera and Sweet Caroline

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PACE YOURSELF

Build a mental speedometer to control your pace on course to find better distances.

By Kristy Herrera ■ Photos by Amy K. Dragoo

If you focus on pace—rather than distances—in between fences, you'll produce a smoother, more flowing round. Because I established my working canter on Sweet Caroline through the turn, I can relax and stay quiet in her mouth in the approach to our next jump.

One of the most common problems I see juniors and adult amateurs struggle with on course is maintaining a consistent pace. Everyone's goal should be to finish the round with the same pace they had when they started—but that's easier said than done. Eight times out of 10, riders start too slow and end too fast. Some start at a decent pace but then slow down midway through and never gear up again.

Having an inconsistent pace not only destroys the nice flow the judge is looking for, but it also interferes with your ability to find the distances to the jumps. If you approach each fence in a reliable working canter—the canter that hunter courses are generally set for—you'll have three options for meeting the correct takeoff spot: maintaining your current pace, moving up or waiting. If you approach the jump either too slowly or too quickly, that narrows your options. For example, if you're going too fast, you'll arrive at the jump at the end of your horse's stride—the biggest stride he can make comfortably—which means you'll have only two options: Either you'll arrive at the fence on a very long, flat distance or you'll be forced to shorten his stride at the last minute and get to a too-deep takeoff spot.

Focusing on pace rather than distances actually makes finding those distances easier. When riders worry about finding distances, they tend to get tense and too busy with their hands. When they focus on their pace instead, they relax and get quieter in their horses' mouths. As a result, the jumps seem somewhat secondary—and the distances work out.

That doesn't mean you should stay at the exact same pace all the way around the course. After each jump your speed needs to slow temporarily as you and your horse recover your balance. However, some people wait too long to return to the working canter in time for a good approach to the next jump. The sooner you get back to your go-to show pace, the better. The following exercises will help you do that.

TIP

Focusing on pace rather than distances actually makes finding those distances easier.

Recognize Different Speeds

Before you can control your pace consistently you need to be able to identify your horse's different speeds. To do that, I like to use the following technique for building a mental speedometer. Think of your horse's speeds as if they're miles per hour. They don't have to actually be accurate miles-per-hour speeds—for example, your "6 mph" doesn't have to be truly 6 mph. It just helps to remember them this way.

Use a range from 0 to 10 mph, with 0 being a halt and 10 being a hand gallop. Anything beyond a 10 is an out-of-control speed that you'd probably rather avoid. Familiarize yourself with each speed on the flat, starting at the halt and working your way through each individual speed all the way up to a 9 or 10, if you're comfortable doing that, and then working your way back down to 0. So

- 1 mph is a normal walk
- 2 mph is a working walk
- 3 is a collected trot
- 4 is a working trot
- 5 is a lengthened trot
- 6 is a very collected canter
- 7 is a medium canter
- 8 is a working canter (usually your go-to speed in the show ring)
- 9 is a lengthened canter but not quite a hand gallop

Note: In the story and photo captions, I use common hunter/jumper terms to

Recognize Different Speeds

To develop my internal speedometer on Sweet Caroline, I ride through her "gears," working our way up from 0 mph—the halt—to …

… 1, a normal walk (shown here), then 2 mph, a working walk.

Next, we move up to 3 mph, a collected trot, and then …

… 4 mph, a working trot.

She doesn't move up to a 5 promptly when I ask, so I reinforce my leg aid with a light tap of the crop.

describe variations in pace, some of which might have different meanings in other disciplines. For example, my medium canter is not as forward as a medium canter in a dressage or event rider's "speedometer."

As you shift gears through the speeds, constantly ask yourself, "What speed am I going?" Especially within gaits, try to define distinct differences between each speed. In the canter, for example, a 6 should feel more collected than a 7, and a 7 should feel a little more comfortable than an 8, which should feel a bit stronger; a 9 should feel clearly more forward than an 8.

For the upward transitions both within and between gaits, close your legs, lift your seat slightly out of the tack and follow your horse's mouth with your hands. For the downward transitions, sit down in the saddle, deepen your heels and hold a little more weight in your hands. As soon as your horse responds by

Recognize Different Speeds

In response, she lengthens her stride a bit more.

Next, I pick up a collected canter, a 6, before …

… lightening my weight in the saddle and asking for a medium canter, a 7.

Then I ask her to gear up to an 8, our go-to show pace.

slowing down, lighten the pressure on the reins. This will encourage him to maintain the new pace on his own.

Maintain Different Speeds

Once you start to recognize the different speeds, the next step is to learn how to *maintain* them. After identifying each speed, ask yourself, "Can I keep it?" Practice maintaining each speed for a while before changing it. Do you find your 8 gradually creeping up to a 9 or slowing down to a 7? Recognizing either tendency—which often happens completely unconsciously—will be valuable later on when you plan your course strategies.

It helps to have someone on the ground to assist you with identifying these different speeds, but you can learn to do it on your own, too. It just takes plenty of repetition.

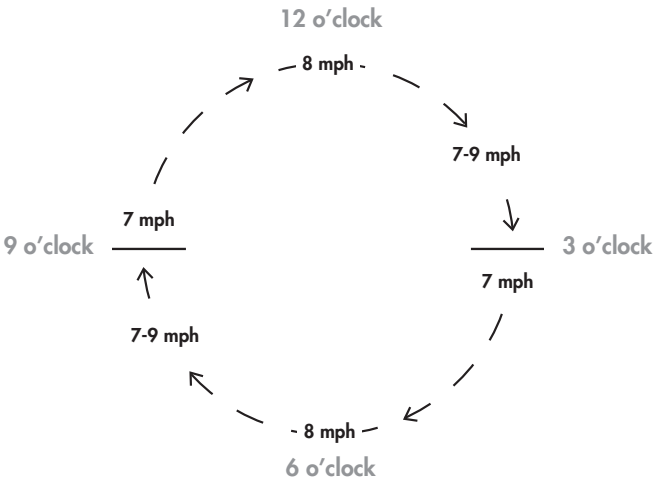
After you've run your speedometer up and down several times, put it to the test. Find your 8 canter, then see if you can go from that to a 6, then see if you can do a 9. Play with different speeds until you start to recognize exactly what it takes—and how long it takes—to get from one to another. For example, how long does it take to get from 9 to 7? Ideally, each transition should be crisp, taking just one or two strides to complete.

If your horse is on the lazy side, practice lots of upward transitions. Be sure to get him

TIP

If your horse is on the lazy side, practice lots of upward transitions. If you have a hotter horse whose speed tends to build over time, practice plenty of downward transitions.

Pace Yourself on a Turn



Place two ground poles or cavalletti on the long sides of the arena at the 3 and 9 o'clock positions on a clock; the tops of the turns are at noon and 6 o'clock. Ride over the poles, making a nice turn in between them.

I approach the first cavalletti at 3 o'clock in my 8 canter.

TIP

Try to identify the most difficult parts of the turn. Arming yourself with this knowledge about your horse's particular tendencies is an invaluable building block for riding courses successfully.

responsive to your leg by following it up with your spur whenever necessary. When he doesn't respond to that, add a cluck. When that doesn't work, use your whip behind your leg. If he's chronically slow to respond, pick a point ahead of you on the long side of the ring and plan to get up to 9 mph by that point. Then use all your driving aids together—leg, spur, cluck and whip—to get to that pace by that point. After you pass it, maintain the 9 around the corner before asking for a downward transition. (If you're riding in a small arena with tight corners, ride the 9 only on the straightaway. Then slow down to an 8 or 7 for the corner.)

On the other extreme, if you have a hotter horse whose speed tends to build over time, practice plenty of downward transitions: walk to halt, trot to halt, canter to walk, etc.

As you practice making transitions between speeds, use visual aids around your ring—dressage letters, fence posts, marks on the wall, etc. Then challenge yourself by planning to reach certain speeds at particular spots. For example, find your 8 canter on the right lead and plan to ask for a 7 between letters A and K. Or pick two fence posts and plan to ride five strides at 7 mph, starting and finishing at 9 mph. Begin with transitions you find easy, then gradually test yourself with harder ones.

Seeing a slightly long distance, I close my legs and ask Caroline to notch her pace up to a 9. She's reluctant to move forward, so I sink down in the saddle to help keep her in front of my leg.

Pace Yourself on a Turn

Once you can recognize your different canter speeds, set up two ground poles or cavalletti on the long sides of the arena, directly across from one another (see the diagram above). Then plan to ride over the poles as if they were jumps, making a nice turn in between them. Imagine that the poles are at the 3 and 9 o'clock positions on a clock and the tops of your turns between them are at noon and 6 o'clock. It doesn't matter what shape the turns are—they can be either round like half circles or more oval-shaped.

Approach the first pole in your 8 canter. Keep that pace

Pace Yourself on a Turn

This brings us to a comfortable takeoff spot for the first cavalletti.

After the jump, I immediately sink down in my seat and heels and lift my eyes, asking her to come back to our recovery pace: 7 mph.

By the time we reach the top of the turn, I've shifted back up to an 8 and am looking ahead to the next cavalletti, which …

… she jumps nicely out of stride.

until you see your distance to the pole. Then either maintain it if the distance looks correct or adjust your canter slightly to meet the pole comfortably—either notching down to a 7 for a tighter distance or notching up to a 9 for a longer distance. After the pole, immediately sink down in your seat and heels and lift your hands and eyes, asking your horse to come back to 7 mph. This is your recovery pace.

As you enter the turn, be ready to move back up to an 8 by the time you reach the top of it, which would be at 6 o'clock if you began on your right lead over the 3 o'clock jump. By maintaining that 8, you'll come nicely forward out of the turn, ready to approach the second pole in the same manner that you used over the first. (If you're on a young horse, it's OK to come back to trot as you begin the turn after the first pole, then pick up the canter and find your 8 again before you exit the turn.)

Repeat the same method over the second pole, adjusting as necessary for the takeoff, then gearing down to 7 mph in the recovery and returning to 8 by the top of the next turn. Make your first priority getting to the right speeds at the right places. Your

Control Your Pace on Course

Preparing for a long approach to an oxer, I find my 8 canter coming out of the turn. When I see a steady distance to the jump, I ask Caroline to notch the pace down to a 7.

This brings us to a good takeoff spot, producing a beautiful jumping effort—notice Caroline's nicely folded, even knees. After the jump, I'll sink down in my seat and heels and lift my eyes, making sure she's in our recovery pace: 7 mph.

Next, we approach a line. Again, I find a forward 8 working canter on the turn and look ahead to the in jump.

In the approach, I see another steady distance, so ask her to notch the pace down to a 7.

second priority is your position. Generally, most riders tip ahead of the motion on landing. Be sure to get back into the saddle as soon as possible after each pole. Otherwise, whenever you have time to think about it, ask yourself, "Do I feel strong in my core? Am I tall in my body? Are my hands quiet?" If you have a ground person, ask her to give you feedback both on your speed and how your position looks at different moments in the exercise.

When this is going well, replace the poles with jumps and repeat the exercise the same way. As you do so, try to identify the most difficult parts of the turn. Every horse is different. Some are harder to bring back to the 7 in the recovery phase; others take extra urging to return to 8 by the top of the turn. Arming yourself with this knowledge about your horse's particular tendencies is an invaluable building block for riding courses successfully.

Control Your Pace on Course

The next step is to practice these skills on a simple hunter course of single fences on long approaches and flowing lines (see photos above and on the next page). Remember to start with your 8 canter and return to it as soon as possible after every jump recovery, always before the top of every turn. If you wait to find your 8 until you come out of the turn and straighten, it'll be too late. Ideally, you want to be at 8 before and after each line as well, but you may need to adjust that slightly for the takeoff of the fence. If you jump in at 7, try to move back up to 8 quickly. If you jump in at 9, try to steady back to 8.

To help yourself monitor your pace around the course, say the number out loud each time you change speeds. In

Control Your Pace on Course

Instead of panicking about how I'm going to make up the distance inside the line, I focus on staying quiet in my body and hands to allow her to make a good jump in.

After we land, to compensate for the quiet jump in, I stand up in my stirrups and ask her to increase her pace again to an 8.

This gets us to a comfortable takeoff spot for the jump out. On landing, I'll ask her to come back to 7 mph and once Caroline feels balanced, return to an 8 canter. I'll continue to focus on my pace this way around the rest of the course.

the approaches, find your 8 and say it out loud. When you reach 7 in the recovery, say it. At the top of each turn, confirm out loud that you're back to your go-to 8.

When you're comfortable controlling your pace on this basic course, move on to more technical courses. You'll find these skills useful on equitation, handy-hunter and jumper courses. With some tight jumper turns and rollbacks, you might not have time to get back up to your 8 for the next jump, but you'll still need to recover from the last jump right away—getting your weight off your horse's neck, looking ahead to the next jump and slowing down before the turn.

At horse shows, because you've done your homework, you'll know what parts of the course you'll need to focus on. Riders think they have so much time on course, but the next element on course happens much faster than you expect. With your new speedometer, you'll always have the canter you need—and you'll start and finish the round at the same pace.

About Kristy Herrera

Kristy Herrera, née McCormack, won the 2002 U.S. Equestrian Federation Show Jumping Talent Search Finals before riding professionally for top riders Jen Alfano, Beezie Madden, Nona Garson and Aaron Vale and spending a year riding for Stephex Stables in Belgium, where she won several grand prix classes. For the next five years, she assisted Missy Clark in training numerous national equitation champions, including her sister, Kimmy McCormack, who won both the 2007 Pessoa/USEF National Hunter Seat Medal Final and the 2007 ASPCA Maclay National Championship. In 2016, Kristy filled in for Jen Alfano while she was sidelined with an injury and won the 2016 USHJA International Hunter Derby Championship riding Helen Lenehan's Miss Lucy. Kristy and her husband, Rich, own and operate Oasis Show Stables, Inc., based in Saratoga Springs, New York, and Wellington, Florida. They coach juniors and adult amateurs and train and show clients' hunters and jumpers.

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911 ACTION PLAN

10 things to do in an emergency

By Elaine Pascoe with Margaret Mudge, VMD

Your horse is standing in the pasture on three legs, unable to walk. Or he's at the gate, covered in blood and frantic with distress. Or you find him in his stall, hay untouched, down and trying to roll.

Let's hope none of these things ever happens—but if you have a horse, you need to be ready for emergencies. From foaling difficulties to the elderly horse that goes down and can't get up, the possibilities for disaster are many. What should you do?

We turned to Margaret Mudge, VMD, a professor and equine surgeon who focuses on emergency and critical care at the Ohio State University School of Veterinary Medicine. Here, with her help, we highlight 10 guidelines that will encourage you to think clearly and act fast in any equine health crisis. You'll also find specific tips for handling some of the most common emergency situations and, in the box on page 11, steps you can take to be ready before misfortune strikes.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do to prepare for an emergency, Dr. Mudge says, is establish a relationship with a veterinarian. "Veterinarians have an obligation to provide emergency care and advice to their clients, and

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For a bleeding wound, hold sterile gauze pads or a clean folded cloth over the site and press firmly until the flow stops. Bandaging the wound will also help.

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Having a well-stocked, easy-to-access emergency first-aid kit handy will help you feel more prepared in any situation. Make sure to have your vet's number posted in the barn as well.

Ready For Anything

Preparation will give your horse an edge in any emergency. Here are six ways you can be ready:

1. Know your horse. "Know what's normal in terms of his personality and behavior so you can recognize if he is distressed or in pain," Dr. Mudge says. "Know his normal vital signs and how to take them."
2. Keep your veterinarian's office and after-hours numbers on your phone and posted in the barn.
3. Know which friends and neighbors you can turn to for help and keep their numbers handy, too.
4. Have a first-aid kit in the barn and another in your trailer. It can be simple—sterile gauze pads, clean bandages and wraps, adhesive wrap or tape, sharp scissors, an equine thermometer, maybe an inexpensive stethoscope—or more elaborate.
5. Make a game plan for referral to a hospital. "Know where you'll go and how you'll ship the horse there," advises Dr. Mudge. "Time counts—if it takes four hours to arrange transportation to a clinic, your horse could arrive sicker and stand less chance of recovery."
6. Know what you can spend. "Decisions can be colored by emotions in an emergency and costs for hospital care can add up quickly," Dr. Mudge notes. "If you know in advance how much money you are willing to spend, you'll be less likely to get in over your head."

they are more likely to respond to a middle-of-the-night call if it comes from a client," she explains. "Also, a vet can provide phone advice only if she has an established relationship and knows the horse. If she hasn't seen your horse before, legally she can't do that."

Emergency Top 10

Every emergency is unique, and it can be nearly impossible to know exactly what you may face. Use these guidelines as a roadmap to help you get through any critical situation with your horse. Mentally rehearse them now, envisioning how you will smoothly handle different situations.

1. Stay calm. This is easier said than done—but it is essential. Horses tend to panic when they're in pain and you will fuel that reaction if you panic as well. A panicking horse can injure himself and you, so take a deep breath. Speak soothingly and move deliberately when you handle the horse even if deep inside you want to freak out.

2. Call right away. If you can't leave the horse, call from your cellphone or ask someone to call for you. Your horse needs veterinary help urgently if he:

- can't bear weight on a leg,
- has a wound that will not stop bleeding or an injury near a vital structure like a joint,
- shows signs of severe or persistent colic or acute laminitis,
- injures an eye,
- struggles to breathe or
- shows severe neurological symptoms.

Plenty of other situations can qualify, too. If you're not sure you're looking at a true emergency, put in a call to your vet's office anyway to let her know what's happening and get her input. Don't worry that she'll think you're overreacting. While you're waiting for the vet to call back,

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Discovering your horse in his pasture with a severely injured leg can be a nightmare situation for any owner. Talk to your horse in a soothing voice and try to keep him still until your vet arrives.

3. Put the horse in a safe place. "Move him into a quiet stall or a round pen where you can monitor him. Pick a place where there will be plenty of room for the veterinarian to work around the horse," Dr. Mudge says. "A double stall or a round pen is best for a horse that may go down, as there's less chance that he'll get cast or injured."

Exceptions:

- Don't try to move the horse if you think he may have fractured a bone (if he is unwilling to put weight on a leg, for instance).
- Put your safety first. "Stay back if he's too panicky or unsteady on his feet to safely handle," Dr. Mudge advises.

4. Get help. An extra pair of hands is invaluable in an emergency. Draft an assistant to help hold the horse, open gates, get first-aid supplies, make phone calls and the like.

5. Assess the problem. Look the horse over carefully for injuries and trouble signs. Is he agitated or depressed? Off his feed? Lame or reluctant to

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A colicking horse may try to lie down and roll repeatedly. Remove his hay in case he has an impaction and if he has gas colic it may disappear on its own. Keep an eye on him and let your vet know if his condition doesn't improve in a few hours.

move? Staggering or going down? If he has a wound, where and how deep is it? Check his vital signs—body temperature, heart rate and breathing rate—for clues to the seriousness of the situation. Rapid respiration or an elevated heart rate (a resting rate over 50 beats per minute) may signal distress. A rectal temperature above 102 degrees F may suggest infection or inflammation.

"Gum color can help show the horse's pain level and severity of illness," Dr. Mudge says. Gums and other mucous membranes should be moist and healthy pink; dry, dark, bright red or purple gums could indicate a potentially serious condition.

6. Report what you see. Write down your observations and report them to the vet. The information you provide will help her judge the severity of the case and decide on the next steps. "If you have a smartphone, send pictures of injuries or a video showing the horse's behavior or movement," Dr. Mudge suggests.

7. Give first aid when you can. Basic first aid can make a big difference for wounds and certain other conditions. You'll find details of some actions you can take—and some you should not take—below.

8. Hold off on medicating. Get a green light from the vet before giving your horse drugs. "There is rarely a need to administer medication before the vet gets there," Dr. Mudge says, and there are risks. Certain drugs could be harmful if the horse has suffered severe blood loss or shock from an injury and some may mask signs and make it more difficult for the vet to assess his condition. "If you have given medication, be sure to tell the vet when she arrives so she can factor that into her treatment," she adds.

9. Let him chill. Once you've checked the horse and applied any appropriate first aid, let him rest quietly while you wait for the vet. "Unless the problem is colic or choke, you can offer hay—forage can distract and calm him," Dr. Mudge suggests. Keep noise and activity to a minimum around the horse's stall. If you're at a busy barn and curious onlookers cluster around, ask them to stay away.

Walk him when necessary. If he's lying quietly in his stall, you don't need to get him up—but if he starts to roll and thrash around, that's a different situation.

10. Stay watchful. Keep an eye on the horse and note if his signs change for better or worse. As long as he seems stable, you don't need to do more, but be ready to act quickly if the picture changes. You may need to calm him if he begins to get agitated, for example, or bring him out for a walk.

Action Plan: Colic

Colic tops the list of horse health crises that worry people most. A colicking horse may go off his feed, paw the

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ABOVE: Carefully clean your horse's wound with sterile saline solution or a gentle stream of water in order to flush out debris or dirt. Cold-hosing an injury can also help reduce swelling.

LEFT: Not all wounds require an emergency call to your vet. Try to take a photo with your smartphone and send it to your vet to get her advice on a plan of action for treatment.

ground, stand stretched out, turn to look or nip at his belly, repeatedly lie down and get up or try to roll. He may stop passing manure or his manure may be abnormally hard and dry or soft and runny. The signs don't tell you what's going on inside—the problem could be as simple as a bit of gas or as severe as a blocked or twisted intestine. Here's what you should do:

■ "Remove hay and any other feed from the horse's stall. If he has an impaction, you don't want anything to add to it," says Dr. Mudge. Water should always be available, though.

■ Watch him closely. Mild gas colic may disappear on its own. Unless the horse is trying to roll or showing other signs of severe pain, it may be safe to watch him for a while. But if he is still uncomfortable after a couple of hours or if his signs clear up and then return, call the vet right away.

■ Walk him when necessary. If he's lying quietly in his stall, you don't need to get him up—but if he starts to roll and thrash around, that's a different situation. "The idea that rolling can cause a twisted gut is debatable, but the horse may injure himself or get cast in the stall," Dr. Mudge says. "Bring him out and walk for five minutes or so until the spasm passes." Walking may help the horse pass gas, but it should not continue for hours, she adds. If the pain doesn't seem to relent with moderate walking, he needs veterinary attention, not more of the same treatment.

Don't apply topical ointments or sprays without the vet's OK. They may interfere with suturing and make it more difficult for the vet to assess and treat the wound.

Should you give Banamine®? Many barns keep this drug (flunixin meglumine, a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory) on hand in case of colic because it's particularly effective for easing gut pain. But, Dr. Mudge notes, "It's important to know that Banamine® is not a colic cure—it does not change the condition that causes the colic." If a colicky horse is given Banamine® and seems to recover on the spot, odds are the signs were caused by gas that was passed before the drug wore off, she says. "Unless the horse is very dehydrated, there's probably no harm in giving one dose [1 milligram per kilogram of body weight, or 500 milligrams for a typical adult horse] to see if that resolves the colic. If it doesn't, don't just repeat the dose. The horse will need other treatment, including fluids and a sedative that the vet can provide."

Action Plan: Wounds

Every scrape or cut isn't an emergency. Those that are include wounds that won't stop bleeding or are deep enough to require stitches—that is, the cut goes all the way through the skin so it gaps if you gently pull the edges. These wounds heal best if they're sutured within the first eight hours. Punctures (especially in the foot) and wounds that involve a joint or tendon need quick veterinary attention, too—the risk of infection is high.

■ Use your smartphone to send a picture of the wound to your vet, Dr. Mudge suggests: "A photo will help her make a preliminary assessment of the damage and give you appropriate advice on what to do next."

■ Clean the wound with sterile saline solution or a gentle stream of water from a hose to flush out dirt and debris. But don't attempt to remove large or deeply embedded pieces of debris—splinters, a nail in the hoof—without consulting with the vet.

■ Bandage the wound if the location permits. For a leg wound apply a clean gauze pad covered with a clean leg quilt and a knit or flannel wrap. The wrap should be snug enough to keep the gauze against the wound without harming tendons or other tissues.

■ Stop bleeding. Bandaging usually helps stop bleeding. "If a leg wound keeps bleeding through the bandage, you may

need to apply a snug layer of bandaging above the wound to slow the flow," Dr. Mudge says. For a body wound, hold sterile gauze pads or a clean folded cloth over the site and press firmly until the flow stops.

■ Don't apply topical ointments or sprays without the vet's approval. They may interfere with suturing and make it more difficult for the vet to assess and treat the wound.

Action Plan: Eye Injury

"An injury in or around an eye is always an emergency. It may seem minor, but it's difficult to tell without expertise and special equipment," Dr. Mudge says. Swelling, squinting, redness, cloudiness, excessive tearing or other discharge should prompt a call to the vet. "Even a small laceration on the lid must be sutured to make sure that the lid heals with smooth margins and closes properly."

■ Send a picture to the vet if you can.

■ Manage discomfort. Eye injuries can be very painful, so the vet may OK a dose of Banamine® or another nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory. If the horse is squinting and seems sensitive to light, move him to a dark stall or put on a fly mask to shade the eye.

■ Prevent rubbing. It's common for a horse to rub a sore or itching eye against his leg, but that will only make the problem worse. Walk him or offer food to distract him.

■ Don't try to treat the problem on your own, Dr. Mudge advises: "It may be safe to gently flush away dirt and discharge with sterile eyewash—if the horse will let you. Otherwise, wait for the vet, who can give the horse a tranquillizer and carry out a thorough examination." And don't medicate the eye with ointments or drops you may have on hand, she adds: "They may be contaminated with bacteria, and using the wrong medication may do more harm than good."

Action Plan: Choke

"The term 'choke' is really a misnomer as it's applied to horses," Dr. Mudge says. A person chokes when food takes a wrong turn into the trachea (windpipe), cutting off air intake, instead of heading down the esophagus, the long tube that leads to the stomach. In horses, she explains, "Choke is an obstruction of the esophagus, not the trachea, so the horse can still breathe. But it's an emergency all the same." As chewed food and saliva back up in the esophagus, "The backup may foam out through the horse's mouth or nostrils, or—and this is the big risk—it may be aspirated, inhaled into the lungs as the horse breathes." That could potentially lead to pneumonia.

■ Put the horse in an empty stall with no food or water. Anything he consumes could be inhaled into his lungs and make the condition worse.

■ Call the vet. Many cases of choke clear on their own, but waiting for that to happen increases the risk of side effects. Besides aspiration and pneumonia, those can include damage and scarring of the esophagus.

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Eye injuries can be especially painful and a serious concern, no matter how seemingly small the issue, and almost always warrant a call to your vet for immediate help.

■ Stay with the horse and try to keep his head down. A horse with choke will often lower his head as he tries to clear the blockage. Encourage that behavior—with his head down, whatever comes up his esophagus will tend to exit through his mouth and nostrils rather than down his trachea.

■ Concentrate on calming the horse. Don't upset him with heroic attempts to clear the blockage. You can't perform the Heimlich maneuver on a horse and if you could it wouldn't help—that move clears the trachea, not the esophagus. You won't be able to clear the blockage by reaching into the back of his mouth, either, because it could be anywhere in the esophagus, even all the way down by the stomach.

When the vet arrives, she can give the horse a strong sedative that will help keep his head down and relax his esophagus. If that's not enough to clear the choke, she can also perform lavage—inserting a nasogastric (stomach) tube down the esophagus and gently pumping in warm water. This process can often help to soften the blockage and move it along.

Action Plan: Neurologic Signs

Neurologic signs range from subtle to scary—anything from a slight abnormality in gait to seizures, staggering, head-bobbing and other strange behavior. The cause may be a toxic plant that the horse consumed, an injury or congenital defect that affects the central nervous system or a disease like equine protozoal myelitis (EPM) or equine herpesvirus myeloencephalopathy (EHM). The more severe the signs, the more urgent the need for veterinary care—the horse could injure himself or the people around him.

■ Recognize when it may not be safe to handle the horse alone. "A horse with a neurological problem may be mentally off or so unsteady on his feet that he falls without warning," Dr. Mudge says. You don't want to be in the wrong place if that happens.

■ If the horse is safe to handle and you have a round pen, put him in it. Because a round pen doesn't have corners, he will have less of a chance of injuring himself there. A double stall is the next-best option.

■ Take a video. "Neurological signs often shift or come and go, so the behavior that prompted you to call the vet may disappear by the time she arrives," Dr. Mudge explains "A video will serve as a record and help her figure out what's going on."

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