

Understanding horse behavior key to safety

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Understanding how horses behave can better prepare you for being safe when handling a horse.

Good horse trainers and managers have spent years learning about horse behavior to be successful with their horses. The horse evolved primarily as a plains dweller. He was often an object of prey for large cats or wolves and subsequently developed a very strong flight response – flee first, ask questions later.

Many times, horse behavior that people consider “dumb” or “dangerous” is simply the horse reacting to situations as a prey animal. The flight response is the horse’s main survival technique, and this single characteristic, i.e., being a prey animal, is more strongly related to how the horse thinks and behaves than almost any other characteristic.

In contrast, the donkey likely evolved in more mountainous terrain. Because of this, the “flee first” strategy would have sometimes led to dangerous or fatal outcomes. So, a donkey will typically evaluate a situation more thoroughly before deciding to flee but often displays the “fight” mechanism.

Knowing a horse’s natural response when being scared can help owners better prepare for such situations. Ideally, a well-broke horse, a horse that has had hours of training and schooling, will be less likely to run from danger or something scary.

Consider Riding Lessons

Riders should also consider working with someone who has more experience with horses in terms of taking riding lessons. As an owner or rider, try to always be prepared, such as having your veterinarian’s phone number on hand and accessible as well as a

contact person's name in case you are injured. Many horse accidents can be avoided and are related to safety issues.

Some accidents are related to riders and horses taking on tasks they may not be fully prepared for, such as jumping a high jump, when the rider and horse have only jumped a few small jumps or taking a young horse on a trail ride when it only has only been on a few rides.

Some accidents can be avoided by having safer equipment, such as a secure cinch, one that is not rotten, or a saddle that properly fits your horse (ask an professional to help you with this, e.g. tack dealer or saddle maker) will be less likely to provoke it to becoming sore and wanting to buck you off, or proper hoof care can prevent your horse from becoming lame (check out this article on extension.org, http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/ag_equine_2006-03.pdf).

Good Environment Contributes to Safety

Horse owners and riders can also improve safety for themselves and their equine by housing them in a safe environment, such as a secure fence or providing housing with an adequate size roof and space for the horse to stand or lay without becoming cast.

Owners and handlers can also purchase equipment that will help keep them and their horses safe, such as an approved helmet, wearing boots when handling a horse, or bell boots and splint boots for their horse to protect their legs.

Another area to not forget is horse transportation. It's important an owner's truck and trailer are in good working condition, e.g. the brakes work, the lights on the truck and trailer work, the trailer floor is in good condition, and there are no insects or varmints living in the trailer.

To help keep you stay safe

Keeping a horse owner/rider and their horse safe is a big job! However, if you consider a few of the things below, both you and your horse can stay safe!

Some key things to remember when handling or riding include:

- When approaching a horse, approach the neck first
- Always talk to your horse and don't sneak up on them
 - Remember they are a “prey” animal
- When walking behind your horse, stay close to the hind legs
- Avoid putting your horse in a dangerous situation
 - Example: Riding on a long trail without proper conditioning and training
- Avoid riding alone
- **Always** tell someone where you are riding
- Pack a first aid kit for you and your horse
 - For more information on Equine Emergency First Aid, check out this free webcast on April 20 at 5 p.m. MT, www.myhorseuniversity.com/resources/webcasts/equine_aid_apr_10
- Consider packing extra equipment and supplies for you and your horse
- Use equipment that is strong but, when needed, can easily be untied or cut loose

- Consider your level of horse handling/riding experiences when purchasing a horse
 - A green horse and a green rider is usually not a good situation.

If you have further questions about horse safety for both the rider and horse, please do not hesitate to contact me at amclean1@uwyo.edu or at (307) 766-4373.

Happy trails!

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