

## **Safety for Horses Being Handled**

Our topics for this week are:

- Desensitization of horses for their future safety
- Senses for safety
- Vocalizations for safety

### **Horse Safety**

The safety of horses is entirely dependent on the handling ability of their owners and who else handles them. Horses protect themselves instinctively by flight reactions. Their flight reaction occurs before thinking, i.e., run first, think later. This reaction can put the horse as well as the handler in danger. Understanding how horses monitor for possible dangers and communicate with each other can be helpful in identifying and defusing potentially dangerous situations.

A technique of exposing horses to a wide variety of new stimuli in a couple of days is sometimes used to demonstrate for entertainment how quickly a young horse can accept a saddle and rider for the first time. The technique, a form of flooding or mental exhaustion from persistent overstimulation, works well for initial acceptance of the saddle and rider, but flooding does not cause lasting effects without daily, less intense, follow-up training periods. Slower, shorter training periods are more effective; safer to horse and rider; and less stressful to young horses in the early stages of their training than flooding to exhaust them.

### **Senses for Safety**

Horses rely to a large extent on their sight for safety. They have excellent peripheral distance vision and constantly scan the horizon, but they cannot see directly behind them. Handlers who remain watchful for dogs in the distance, blowing plastic bags, and other potentially horse-scary things have a safety advantage.

Horses' sense of hearing is acute and enhanced by highly mobile ears. Handlers who use a soothing voice inflection when horses wish to flee will be at a safety advantage. Horses are relaxed by hearing sounds of normal activity. A handler trying to be too quiet or causing excessively loud noises make horses act nervous.

Horses monitor odors for danger and social status. Horses greet each other by smelling the breath of each other. Pecking order is begun at the first greeting. A handler should not allow strange horses to smell each other's breath while they are under his direct control. One horse may strike out when they begin the sorting of the level of their social status after smelling each other.

Horses touch each other in bonding the herd members and asserting social status within the herd. Handlers can reinforce horses' respect and trust in the handler by grooming them and petting them after they perform a desired action or demonstrate a proper response. It is beneficial in establishing trust with horses for handlers to spend time milling with them and when they do not attempt to flee, casually pet them as they graze. A handler's presence and touch should be associated with normal herd activities and relaxation, not just being worked or receiving medical treatments.

The sense of touch is well developed in horses. The touch of a fly on their skin will cause the skin to twitch to shake the fly off. Horses have a sensitive prehensile upper lip that can pick out grains of oats from corn and pills from feed and unopen latches on gates and doors. Some horses will use the tactile hairs on their muzzle to test electric fences. There are handlers who believe horses should only be rubbed and not patted because they have such a sensitive sense of touch. Yet, a dominant herd mate may reprimand another horse who violates the herd's social structure by a controlled kick to the abdomen. Patting a horse is not painful, and desensitization to pats are needed for horses kept in warm, humid climates since a handler may need to slap a horse to kill horseflies on its body for the protection of the horse and the handler. Horses quickly learn to not resent a non-injurious slap that protects it from painful bites.

### **Vocalizations**

Horses have a spectrum of vocalizations to communicate with each other to assist each other's safety. A **nicker** is used to acknowledge near presence of a herd member. When calling out for the location of another herd member, a loud **neigh** or whinny is used. **Clacking** (snapping, tooth clapping or champing) is a chomping movement of the jaws with the corners of the mouth pulled back that signals submission. Clacking is used often by foals, weanlings, and yearlings around dominant herd members. If a horse is feeling good and is excited, a deep breath and **blow** are used. A **snort** is also used when excited, but is an announcement it is ready to run. Horses that feel they are working hard or harder than desired will **grunt** or groan. A **squeal** is an aggressive noise used more often by mares to startle a potential opponent. Screams are rare sounds of great fear such as in a barn fire.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- Handlers of horses are responsible for horse safety
- Horses use all their senses to monitor for danger, especially their sense of sight
- Horses vocalize to avert fear or to initiate a flight reaction

Abby says it is time to wrap up this episode.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.