

Safety Considerations

Our topics for this week are:

- Safety first
- Distraction versus pain for restraint
- Animals' respect for handlers
- Appropriate attire for handling animals

Animals should always be handled with precautions against injury. The safest animals can be safe 99% of the time, but handlers should always be prepared for the 1% chance that the usually safe animal will become unsafe due to pain, perceived territorial threats, illness, or a myriad of other situations unlike those in the past.

Handlers must be constantly aware of the risks of injury to himself or herself, other people, or the animal being handled. A common error made by many who have worked around their own animals for years without injury is a false assumption that other species or animals within the same species will react to situations in the same way as their animals. Horses are not big dogs, and cats are not little dogs. Each species has its inherent species behavior and within a species, each individual has a unique temperament and behavior. Factors which affect an individual animal's reactions to handling are familial tendencies; prior handling and training; trust, or the lack of it, in the handler; and stressful events preceding or during the handling. As a result, the assumption all domestic species or animals within a species are the same can lead to serious injury.

Most injuries from animals are caused by the handler being overconfident and under-competent. Animal handlers must always position themselves and take other precautions to eliminate or minimize the chance of injury to all involved.

Distraction Versus Pain for Restraint

Distractions are the basis for most humane and effective animal handling techniques and are not painful when correctly used. Pain is a message sent to the brain that body tissue is being injured. Distraction is applying a stimulus that supercedes competing stimuli. When a distraction technique is applied severely or incorrectly, it can inflict pain. For example, when a nose twitch, a pinching distraction technique most often used on the upper lip of horses, is applied correctly there is no tissue injured and therefore no pain. If used inappropriately and the twitch causes pain, there is evidence of tissue damage, i.e., soreness persisting after releasing the twitch, loss of function of the upper lip, or a change in the appearance of the tissue such as swelling, cuts, or bruising. Other signs of pain in animals can be a decrease in normal activities, such as eating, grooming, or nesting. A hunched posture, tooth grinding, glazed stare, and elevated heart rate or respiratory rate may also suggest the presence of pain. Animals, particularly prey animals, may mask some signs of pain if in unfamiliar surroundings or otherwise feeling threatened. Observation from a hiding location or with surveillance cameras may be necessary to monitor for

pain in these animals.

Some animals will react to distraction in fear as if the distraction was painful. When this occurs, chemical restraint may be needed if there is a reasonable possibility that fear will be intensified and hinder future efforts to handle the animal.

Respect for Handlers

Animals should be respectful, not fearful, of human handlers. Respect is gained by their knowledge that either pleasure (praise, food treats) or discomfort (not pain) will consistently occur with certain behaviors. Fear can result from the expectation of pain. If fear is from instinct, it can be moderated. If it is from having experienced pain, it is often permanent.

The social dominance (leadership) of a handler should be based on respect, not fear of injury. Animal leaders establish their social position by the control of movement and access to resources. Effective human handlers do the same. For example, well-trained dogs are required to sit before receiving food and taught to wait before going through doors or up or down stairs. Food is provided only with permission of the handler. In the case of large animals such as horses, the use of food rewards can be impractical or dangerous due to the risk of the animal invading the handler's personal space. Livestock wish to be left alone. Requiring them to respond to a stimulus and then removing that stimulus so that they are again undisturbed is a great reward. Rather than using food rewards, large animal respect for human personal space is more safely established by simply staring at the animal or moving a hand away from the handler's body. The stimulus is immediately removed after a desired response from the animal. Additional positive reinforcement with food rewards may be desirable in some cases, but the large animal's access to the food should never be associated with being close to the handler, particularly their hands or pockets.

Adaptation to Special Circumstances

Animal handling is not a set recipe that fits all situations. An effective animal handler must adapt techniques to the species, the surroundings, and the individual. Each animal handled should first be observed to assess its current attitude and physical condition.

Young, elderly, and pregnant animals need special handling. How immature animals are handled can ingrain their responses to handling for the rest of their life. Young animals may be more easily injured due to the risk of injuring growth plates in bones and because of their uncoordinated attempts to resist handling. Elderly animals may have a lifetime accumulation of good or bad experiences with being handled and a greater probability of failing organ function and arthritis. Pregnant animals may be more fearful from the instinct of knowing that their escape, if needed, will be more difficult.

Appropriate Attire, Grooming, and Personal Habits

Proper handler attire for the type of animal handling to be done is important for handlers and animals. Inappropriate attire can be dangerous.

Examples of inappropriate attire are:

- Loose clothes
- Loose long hair
- Dangling jewelry (earrings, bracelets, necklaces)
- Bulky rings
- Hoods or other head gear that obstructs peripheral vision
- Tight boots or boots with slick soles around large animals

Clothing should be reasonably clean and unsoiled. Attire for animal handling should be worn only when handling or restraining animals and then changed to reduce the risk of transmitting disease among other animals and to humans. Fingernails should not extend beyond the end of the finger to reduce the risk of injury to other handlers or to animals being handled and because longer fingernails are more capable of entrapping disease agents. If ID badges are needed, they should either be attached to the clothing or worn using a safety, breakaway lanyard around the neck. Handler cuts or abrasions should be treated and covered before handling animals. Smoking or consuming food or drink while working with animals or in animal handling areas should be strictly avoided due to the danger of introducing infectious organisms to the handler's mouth.

Dogs, Cats, and Other Small Companion Animals

An outer garment such as a jacket or coat with a smooth, washable exterior and water impermeable shoes are appropriate for handling dogs, cats, and other small animals. Long sleeved coats can aid in protecting handlers from cat scratches. Waterproof aprons should be worn when bathing animals. Safety glasses or goggles should be worn if handling animals whose nails or beaks are being trimmed, especially when using a high speed electric grinder (Dremel). Face masks or shields must be worn when handling birds with pointed beaks. Latex rubber or nitrile gloves should be worn if hands have cuts or cracks and should always be worn when handling small mammals other than dogs and cats to protect from infectious diseases and allergens.

Livestock and Poultry

Proper attire for handlers of livestock and poultry differs from the attire needed for small animal handling. Hats for handlers of livestock or poultry aid to protect from overexposure to sunlight and head injury. Ball caps are popular, but a simple brimmed hat will also help protect against sun on the ears and back of the neck. When working in tight quarters, brimmed hats also give the handler an early warning of the possibility of hitting his head on structure beams or handling equipment. They also help keep spider webs in barns out of his face and hair. Hoods or other head gear, or long hair styles that obstruct peripheral vision or might become snagged and entrap the head should not be worn when working with livestock, particularly cattle, horses, or swine. Goggles should be used if working with horses or cattle in wet/muddy conditions. Temporary blindness, particularly around horses can be dangerous.

Coveralls or thick trousers in muted green or khaki color are appropriate for routine handling of livestock or poultry. A strong belt can be used as a temporary lead rope around the

animals neck or a flag to direct animal movement. Leather leggings are advisable if handling ratites (ostriches or emus) to protect legs from forward strikes. Short sleeves or rolled up long sleeves are needed to keep arms from being easily caught on fences, gates, and handling equipment. Boots should be loose fitting, water impermeable, with non-skid soles. Metal toe caps may be advisable when working with cattle, small ruminants, or ratites.

Disposable rubber gloves and nose and mouth masks (N95 or N100) are needed in circumstances that could involve infectious diseases or dusty environments, particularly in total confinement poultry environments. Ear protection is often needed when working with swine and other situations likely to cause hearing damage. Dangling jewelry or long hair can catch on chains used for leads or crossties.

If working on a farm or ranch, trust and respect from owners of animals are gained by adhering to common farm and ranch rules.

Common courtesies when working on farms or ranches are:

- If you open it, close it
- If it was open, leave it open
- If you unlock it, lock it
- If you move it, put it back
- If you make a mess, clean it up
- Do not climb on fences or gates without permission
- Do not leave an animal in a dirty stall, clean it as often as you find it dirty
- Unless certain of probable safety or animal welfare risks, do not tell an owner how to handle their animal without being asked

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

1. Animals that are either fearful of handlers or have no respect of humans are the most dangerous to handle.
2. Handlers must be constantly vigilant of potential dangers to animals being handled, handling assistants, and the handlers themselves.
3. Distractions are powerful tools for handling animals.
4. Proper handling attire is important for handler safety.

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 online at <https://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.