

Horse Ownership

A general guide for the first-time horse/pony owner





HORSE OWNERSHIP

A General Guide for the First-Time Horse/Pony Owner

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INTRODUCTION



Looking after a horse is exciting but requires considerable time and energy.

Owning your first riding horse or pony is very exciting. However, looking after your new mount properly requires lifestyle changes and a considerable amount of time commitment and energy. Horses and ponies must be cared for every day of the year. New owners should be aware of the time, financial and other commitments involved.

This handbook is intended as a guide to looking after a riding horse or pony.





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BUYING YOUR HORSE/PONY



Make sure that you choose a horse that suits your requirements.

Before you buy

Before buying a horse, decide what you intend to do with him. How much experience with horses do you have? What size and type of horse/pony will suit you best? Consider what you hope to achieve with your mount. Finally, you and your horse/pony should match each other well.

Further advice for buying your first horse/pony

1. Seek professional advice.
2. Have a clear idea of what you want from your horse.
3. Buy a horse/pony with experience in the discipline you wish to pursue.
4. Be realistic about your current level of expertise (don't take on a horse you're not ready for).
5. Above all, make sure that your horse has a good temperament.

Where to buy

Horses can be bought either privately or at public sales. Both methods have advantages and disadvantages.



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Private sales

Approximately 75% of sport horses in Ireland are sold privately.

Advantages:

- you can try the horse out more than once;
- you do not have to make a decision there and then; and,
- sometimes a home trial may be possible.

Disadvantages:

- you are trying a horse in his home environment, but he may react differently in a strange environment;
- you have less choice, so you may have to travel many miles to see a selection of animals; and,
- the purchaser pays for vetting.

Public sales

The main venues are at Goresbridge in Co. Kilkenny and at Cavan Equestrian Centre in Cavan.

Advantages:

- you can choose from a large selection of animals;
- horses are vetted before the sale and can be re-vetted immediately after purchase; and,
- stable vices, such as weaving, box walking, or crib biting, must be declared (these generally devalue the horse and, if they are discovered, the horse can be returned within seven days of sale, following confirmation of the vice by either a vet or other expert nominated by the sale company).

Disadvantages:

- it can be difficult to choose the right animal;
- there is no trial of the horse; and,
- the horse may react differently at home.





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FACILITIES



Post and rail fencing.



The stable must be safe for the horse.

Before buying a horse, ensure that you have adequate facilities to maintain him. You will need land, a stable, a manure pit, a soiled water tank, a feed store, and facilities for tack. You will also need a safe area to exercise your horse in. Keep in mind that during the winter months, with shorter daylight hours, it may be unsafe to exercise your horse on the road before or after school/work.

Stable and land

The stable must be safe for the horse, free from hazards, strongly constructed and properly maintained. The recommended size is 3.6m x 3.6m (12ft x 12ft) for a horse and 2.7m x 2.7m (9ft x 9ft) for a pony. Poor housing is stressful to all animals and may result in a build-up of respiratory disease.

A minimum area of approximately 0.6 hectares (1.5 acres) of grazing land is needed for each horse.

Fencing

Security and safety are priorities when leaving your livestock out in fields. Make sure that the boundaries are well fenced and secure. Post and rail is preferable as a means of securing paddocks, though horse-friendly electric fencing is also a good choice. Barbed wire should be avoided, as it can cause serious injuries to your





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animal. Ensure that paddocks are free from any harmful objects, such as broken machinery and broken glass.

Bedding



Straw bedding.



Wood shavings.

Correct bedding for your horse is important for the following reasons:

- it encourages the horse to lie down and there is less risk of injury on a concrete floor;
- it encourages the horse to pass urine and assists in drainage and absorption; and,
- it helps to keep the horse clean.

The different types of stable bedding available include:

- straw;
- wood shavings;
- shredded paper;
- sawdust; and,
- rubber mats.

Straw is the most common type of bedding material. There are three types: wheat straw, oat straw and barley straw.

Wheat straw is generally considered to be the best type of bedding straw, as it is





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harder and therefore lasts longer. It is not as palatable as oat or barley straw, and horses are not so tempted to eat it. Straw must be clean and free of dust and mould, as these could lead to your horse developing respiratory problems.

Wood shavings are becoming more common because:

- good quality shavings are fairly dust free; and,
- horses are not inclined to eat them.

However, they are expensive to buy and take longer to rot down.

Shredded paper:

- is not easy to compost; and,
- is heavy when it gets wet, so needs to be well maintained.

Sawdust:

- requires a large area for storage; and,
- can be very dusty when dry.

Rubber matting:

- is cheap to maintain; and,
- requires a sprinkling of shavings on top.

Mucking out

There are three main methods of managing your horse's bed:

- daily mucking out;
- deep littering; and,
- semi-deep littering.

Safety first – the horse should be tied up or moved to another stable when mucking out.

Daily mucking out

The stable is cleared of soiled bedding and droppings every day, with a full cleaning



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in the morning and a second minor cleaning in the evening. This will help to:

- keep the stable clean and fresh;
- make the bedding last longer; and,
- contribute to better hygiene levels.

Deep littering involves:

- putting in a good bed (approx. 45-50cm in depth) and adding a small amount every day;
- picking up droppings regularly;
- leaving urine to drain and be absorbed by the bedding; and,
- making a solid warm bed.

A disadvantage of deep littering is that when the stable needs to be cleaned out, it is a major job and hard work. A build of ammonia smells can have a negative impact on the horse's respiratory system and furthermore, deep littering can attract flies.

Semi-deep littering:

- is a compromise between daily mucking out and deep littering; and,
- takes out the wettest areas of bed.

Whatever type of bedding you choose, make sure that there is a good bed underneath the horse and throw extra bedding up around the walls so that the horse will be less likely to get 'cast' or stuck against the wall and unable to get to his feet.

Livery

If you do not have a stable or land, you will need to put the horse or pony on livery in a nearby yard. Livery options available include do it yourself (DIY), half livery and full livery.





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GENERAL CARE AND HANDLING



Regular grooming promotes good health and builds a rapport with the horse.

Approaching the horse

- Always speak to your horse before approaching or touching him. Some horses are likely to jump and may kick out when startled;
- always approach your horse quietly from the side. If the horse is turned away from you, call to him and encourage him to turn towards you. Never approach your horse directly from the rear;
- touch the horse by first placing a hand on his shoulder or neck; the touch should be a rubbing action; and,
- never tie your horse by the reins as he may pull back and injure himself. Always use a headcollar.

Handling the horse

- When working around your horse, wear boots or hard-toed shoes to protect



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your feet. Never wear runners, soft shoes or go barefoot;

- when working around your horse, tie him securely with a quick-release knot, or have someone hold him with a lead rope. Use cross-ties when possible, but be sure that they have panic snaps or are secured with a breakable tie, such as baling twine;
- always work close to your horse. If you are near his shoulder, you won't be struck with the full force of his feet, nor will you receive the full force of a kick if you stay close to the body when you work about the haunches or pass behind your horse;
- know your horse and his temperament and reactions;
- be firm and control your temper at all times;
- always let a horse know what you intend to do. When picking up the feet, for example, do not grab the foot hurriedly as this will startle the horse and may cause him to kick. When lifting the foot, touch the shoulder or hindquarter, and then run your hand down the leg to pick it up;
- work around a horse from a position as near to the shoulder as possible;
- never stand directly behind a horse or directly in front of him. To work with the tail, stand to the side, near the point of the buttock, facing towards the rear. Grasp the tail and draw it around to you;
- be calm and confident around horses. A nervous handler makes a nervous horse;
- do not tease your horse. Teasing may cause the horse to develop dangerous habits for the rest of his life. Avoid feeding the horse treats from your hand frequently;
- punish a horse only at the instant of disobedience. If you wait, even for a minute, the horse will not understand why he is being punished. Punish without anger, or your punishment may be too severe. Never strike a horse about the head;
- check the turnout area for old machinery, broken boards and nails, and poisonous plants and trees. Check fences frequently for loose nails, broken sections and loose wire;
- if leaving a headcollar on a loose horse, the headcollar must be the breakaway type. Leather, though more expensive, is always preferable;





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- if the headcollar is too loose, the horse may catch a foot in it, especially if the horse is trying to scratch his head with a hind foot. A loose headcollar may catch on fence posts or other pasture objects. Some headcollar materials will shrink when wet, so be sure to check the fit regularly; and,
- check headcollars on young stock daily. As a horse grows, his head grows too, and if the headcollar gets too tight it can cause extreme pain and discomfort.

Leading the horse



When leading, walk beside your horse. Well-fitting headcollar.

- When leading your horse, walk beside him – not ahead or behind. A position at the horse's shoulder is considered safest. Never pull the horse behind you: he may jump forward on top of you;
- always turn the horse away from you and walk around him;
- use both hands when leading. If the horse rears up, release the hand nearest to the headcollar so your feet stay on the ground. Do not try to pull the horse;
- it is customary to lead from the left (near side), using the right hand to hold the lead rope and the left hand to take the slack;
- when leading, extend your right elbow slightly towards the horse. If the horse makes contact with you, his shoulder will hit your elbow first and move you away from him;
- a horse should be workable from both sides, even for mounting and dismounting;
- the horse is stronger than you; do not try to out-pull him;



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- never wrap the lead rope or reins around your hand, wrist, or body;
- never drape a lead rope or reins across your shoulders or neck;
- do not wear jewellery around horses. Rings can cut deeply into fingers, and bracelets can get caught in the reins or lead rope. Dangling earrings are particularly dangerous;
- exercise extreme caution when leading a horse through a narrow opening such as a door. Be certain that you have firm control and step through first. Step through quickly and get to one side to avoid being crowded;
- the stirrup irons on a saddle should always be run up when dismounted or leading the horse;
- use your judgment when turning a horse loose. Lead completely through the gate or door, and turn the horse around, facing the direction from which you have just entered. Then unclip the lead rope or remove the headcollar or bridle. Avoid letting a horse bolt away from you when released. Good habits prevent accidents; and,
- avoid using excessively long lead ropes – they can become entangled. Watch the coils when using lunge ropes and do not allow them to become entangled.

Tying the horse

- A quick-release knot should be used to tie a horse up. This knot allows the release of the horse quickly and easily should he get into trouble;
- tie the horse far enough away from strange horses so that they cannot fight;
- tie the horse with a rope long enough to allow comfortable movement but short enough to avoid becoming tangled or allowing the horse to get a foot over the rope;
- never tie your horse by the reins as he may pull back and injure himself. Always use a headcollar;
- never tie a horse directly to a fixed object such as a gate, fence, metal ring or trailer. If a horse pulls back he can panic and do a lot of damage to himself; and,
- always tie the lead rope to a piece of string attached to the fixed object. This way, if the horse does pull back, the string will break under the strain.





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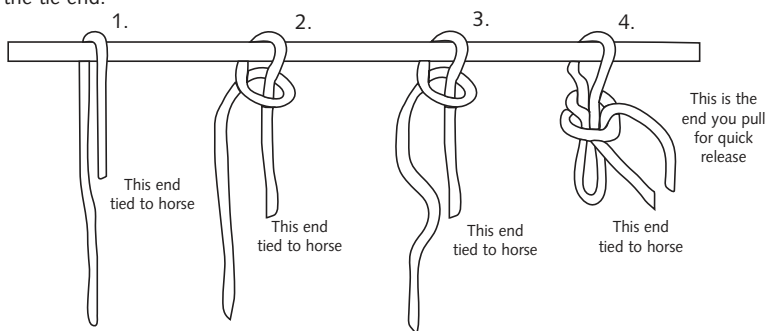
Tying the quick-release knot

Practice tying this knot without your horse until you can do it correctly and release it just by pulling on the free end. This is the **ONLY** knot you should use to tie horses.

1. Put your lead rope over the post.
2. Bring the release end over and around the tie end.

3. Pull a loop through using the release end, then pull the knot closed so it looks like picture No. 4.

4. Now, if your horse pulls back in a panic, you untie the knot by pulling on the release end – the whole thing should come undone easily.



Grooming your horse/pony

Daily grooming of your horse is important for several reasons:

- regular grooming promotes good health – dust and dirt can cause skin diseases and infections;
- during grooming, the handler has the opportunity to inspect the horse for any wounds or injuries;
- grooming improves the horse's appearance; and,
- grooming helps the handler to develop a rapport with the horse.

A basic grooming kit consists of: hoof pick, rubber curry comb, dandy brush, body brush, metal curry comb, mane comb, scissors, sweat scraper and tail bandages.

The sequence for a full groom is:

1. Pick out the feet, as there may be stones or other foreign objects stuck in the



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horse's foot.

2. Brush the body. Start at the shoulder/neck area and work your way back along the body, making sure the horse is safely tied or held.
3. Brush out the mane. Tease out the tail with your fingers or a soft body brush. Never use a mane comb as this breaks the hair and will result in the horse having a light tail.
4. Clean the head. Never use a dandy brush on the horse's head as the bristles are too rough; use a body brush and be firm but gentle.
5. Sponge the eyes, nostrils and dock with separate sponges, colour-coded to ensure that there is no cross infection.
6. Finish off with a cloth to remove the dust that has risen from grooming and is lying on top of the coat.

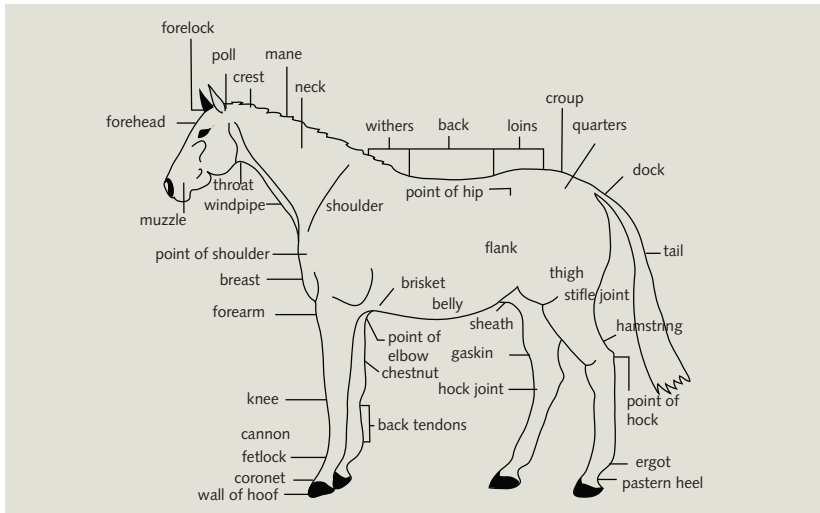
Never give a full groom when the horse/pony is living out. Instead, pick out the feet and use a rubber curry comb with circular motion and a dandy brush with the



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lie of the hair to remove caked mud. Do not use a body brush on the horse's body as it takes out the natural oils in the coat, which provide heat and act as a barrier to the rain. It is important to remove mud and sweat marks from the areas that are covered with tack (bridle and saddle/rollers and boots) before exercising to avoid sores developing when the horse sweats and the tack rubs against the skin.



Safety while grooming

- Never stand directly behind the horse. Always work close to the horse or pony and a little to the side so he can see you;
- never sit or kneel beside the horse when grooming the lower parts. Always bend or squat;
- never crawl under the horse to get at the other side; and,
- do not leave grooming tools underfoot while grooming. Put them where you will not trip over them and the horse will not step on them.



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FEEDING



There are many factors to consider when feeding your horse.

Correct feeding is essential for the health of the horse. A well-balanced diet should provide all the necessary nutrients required to maintain the horse in good condition. A number of simple rules apply:

1. Allow access to fresh, clean water at all times.
2. Feed concentrates 'little and often'.
3. Feed according to the temperament and condition of the horse.
4. Feed plenty of fibre for healthy gut function.
5. Feed by weight, not volume of feed: weigh a scoop and a typical hay net.
6. Feed at the same time each day. Horses are creatures of habit and like a settled routine.
7. Use high quality feeds. Do not use dusty or mouldy feeds.





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8. When changing the diet, do so gradually to reduce the risk of digestive upset.
9. Don't exercise the horse immediately after feeding; allow at least one hour after feeding before working the horse and do not feed until one hour after working.

Remember

Not every horse can be fed the same amounts or types of feed. When deciding what to feed your horse, ascertain the total amount of food he should be getting, the correct percentage of concentrate to roughage, and the right type of food.



These calculations will vary according to:

- the horse's weight;
- the horse's breed and temperament;
- the amount and type of work the horse is doing;
- the rider's experience (feeding a horse a high energy diet could prove detrimental for a novice rider);
- whether the horse is stabled or at grass;
- the time of year and climatic conditions (in winter, horses require extra food for warmth);
- the type of pasture;
- the horse's age; and,
- the horse's body condition. (Excess fat should not be carried in the areas highlighted in the picture above. Also, the bony structures beneath the highlighted areas should not be distinctly visible/prominent.)





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Feeding tactics for new horses

- Find out what the horse was fed by the previous owner. Ask the make and the type of feed, the amounts offered, and if there was any particular reason why that feed was used;
- make sure that you have some hay and feed for your new charge upon arrival at his new home;
- keep the rules of good feeding uppermost in your mind;
- feed at maintenance or light work levels until you get to know your horse. While it may be very tempting to lovingly feed scoopfuls of mix to your new friend, his behaviour will be better if hard feeds are used according to the manufacturer's guidelines;
- start with a diet of 80–100% forage, and 0–20% low energy, high fibre hard feed, preferably a cube or mix. Amounts depend on the body condition of the horse; and,
- don't overcomplicate the feeding programme, and if in doubt phone one or more of the feed company helplines.



Always feed with a balanced diet.



Hay should be analysed for feed value.

Steps to good feeding practice

Step one: estimate the horse's bodyweight using:

- weight tape;
- table of weight (Table 1); or,



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- weighbridge (weigh vehicle and horsebox at a weighbridge and record the weight, then make a return trip with the horse loaded and subtract the first weight from the second weight to establish the horse's weight).

TABLE 1: Table of weights.

Height (hands)	Bodyweight (kg)
12	230–290
13	290–350
14	350–420
15	420–520
16	500–600
17	600–72

TABLE 2: Estimating feed intake.

Height (hands)	Estimated intake (kg)
12	6.5
13	8
14	10
15	12
16	13.5
17	13.5

Step two: estimate the horse's appetite

An adult horse's appetite is about 2.5% of his bodyweight. This figure is intended as a guide only and must be adjusted according to the individual horse.

The height of the horse is measured on level ground to the highest point of the wither. It is measured in hands or centimetres. A hand equals four inches. **Table 2** shows a simple rule of thumb for estimating intake.

For horses that are half a hand higher (two inches), an extra 1kg is added. Also, consider the build of the horse (heavy or light) and whether the horse is at grass. If the horse is of fine build he can be fed 1kg less, and if of a heavier build, 1kg more.

Formula: Appetite (kg) = bodyweight/100 x 2.5

Example: Appetite of 500kg horse = 500/100 x 2.5 = 12.5kg of dry matter/day (total amount of food to be fed including both concentrate and roughage)



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TABLE 3: Forage-to-concentrate ratio.

Maintenance		0-10% concentrate	90-100% roughage
Light work	4–6 hours/week	25% concentrate	75% roughage
Medium work	6–10 hours/week	30% concentrate	70% roughage
Hard work	10 hours +/-/week	40% concentrate	60% roughage

Step three: forage-to-concentrate ratio

Using Table 3, we can calculate how the energy is divided between forage (hay, haylage, grass) and concentrates.

Step four: deciding the ration

The energy value of food must be matched with the horse's energy requirements (i.e., how much work he is doing). It can be a complicated process and, if in doubt, the first-time horse owner should seek help from an experienced owner, or a professional from one of the feed companies.

Different feeds have different feed values. Hay varies in feed value and should be analysed. The energy and protein content of proprietary feed is printed on the bag.

Also evaluate:

The work you are going to do

Is the animal a first pony for a child, a hack for an adult, a hunter, or an amateur competition horse? Your chosen activity will affect the amount and type of feed your horse requires.

Stabled, at grass, at home, or at livery?

Keeping a horse outside in winter means that the horse needs more supplementary food to help keep warm and to prevent weight loss. In spring and summer, when the grass is growing, less supplementary feed is required.





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What is the horse's temperament, and how does he hold his weight and body condition?

The horse's breed often dictates his temperament, which in turn affects whether a horse loses or gains weight easily.

Age and tooth quality

For horses aged four years old and under, have their teeth checked every six months by a vet or equine dental technician. For horses older than four years, a check every twelve months is sufficient.

Does the horse suffer from any specific diet-related issues?

There are a number of possible diet-related disorders which the horse or pony may suffer from. It is important to consult with your vet if the horse is not behaving normally, losing body condition, or is overweight.

Watering

Water is an essential requirement for the horse's well-being. A horse that is deprived of water for more than a few days will become dehydrated and may die. The average intake of water per day is 36 litres. A number of factors influence the horse's water intake, including:

- diet;
- ambient temperature (a horse will drink more in warm weather);
- workload (horses working hard drink more); and,
- health.

As with feeding, certain rules apply:

- ensure a constant supply of clean, fresh water;
- keep all water storing containers clean;
- regulate water intake before and after hard work (take away water supply); and,
- monitor the horse's intake (this is easier to do if the horse is watered by bucket, and more difficult with an automatic water drinker).





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Dehydration test

A horse that does not drink water for any length of time will become dehydrated. The ‘pinch’ test is a simple way to determine hydration status. With your thumb and index finger, pinch a fold of skin on the horse’s neck. When released, the skin should fold back flat quickly. If it does not, and remains longer than a few seconds (five at most), the horse is likely to be dehydrated.

Water is usually given in one of two ways:

1. Buckets

Advantages:

- the exact amount of water intake is known; and,
- they are easy to clean.

Disadvantages:

- this method is labour intensive;
- buckets can be heavy to carry; and,
- buckets can be knocked over by the horse.

2. Automatic water drinkers

Advantages:

- there is a constant supply of fresh, clean water; and,
- this method saves time and labour.

Disadvantages:

- bowls can be small and the horse may not be able to get a good draught of water;
- it can be difficult to monitor the horse’s intake; and,
- in winter months, the pipes to the drinkers can freeze, resulting in no supply.





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FOOT CARE

There is an old saying – ‘no foot no horse’. Think of the size of the horse bearing down on four small feet: it is no wonder that the likelihood of problems arising is great. It is therefore essential that the horse’s feet are cared for properly.

Horses at grass and not in work

Horses with good strong horn growth should not require shoes. Have the feet trimmed by a farrier every four to six weeks, so that the foot does not grow out of shape. If a horse has poor horn growth or is subject to slits and cracks in the hoof, then it may be better to put front shoes on.

Horses in work

Working horses generally need to be shod for the following reasons:

- for protection (working on hard surfaces, hacking out on roads);
- for grip;
- to reduce concussion;
- to improve the condition of poor or neglected feet; and,
- to improve conformational defects.

When to attend to feet

You should attend to your horse’s feet:

- every four to six weeks;
- when the shoe is cast (falls off) or sprung (only a nail or two holding it on);
- when clenches (top of nail, which holds the shoe on the hoof wall) arise, which could injure the horse;
- when the shoe has worn thin;
- when the hoof has grown too long; and,
- when the shoe is too tight, causing a nail bind (similar to having a stone in your foot, causing lameness) or nail prick (the nail pricks the sensitive part of the foot, causing lameness).



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Recognising a well-shod foot

In a well-shod foot:

- clenches are all level;
- the foot has a regular, even shape; and,
- the horse is sound.



Have feet trimmed regularly.

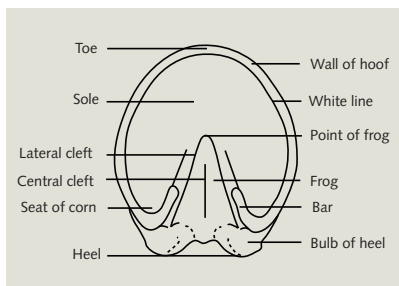


Diagram of the horse's foot.

Picking the horse's feet

Get into the habit of picking out your horse's feet every day to keep the frog healthy and to keep an eye on general foot health. The frog plays a major role in the circulation of the leg, as it acts as a pump when in contact with the ground. It also has a role as an anti-slipping and anti-concussion device. If it is infected with thrush (a foul-smelling frog with moisture in the cleft, which is caused by standing in dirty bedding and failure to pick out the feet regularly), this can sometimes cause lameness. Picking out feet removes any stones that may be lodged, avoiding discomfort and the possibility that the horse might go lame through a stone bruise. If a sharp stone damages the sole of the foot, infection can develop under the sole, which, if untreated, travels up through the foot and breaks out at the coronary band or at the heel. The horse will usually show signs of lameness and the foot will need to be pared back to allow the pus to escape and poulticed to draw out the infection. It is best to treat early before it travels upwards. This can be prevented through regular picking out of the feet.



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GENERAL HEALTH



A healthy horse has a good shine off his coat, eats all his feed, has an interest in his surroundings and shows no sign of injury or lameness. Horses must be checked daily for signs of abnormal health. Any unusual behaviour should be noted and checked. If in doubt, always call your veterinary surgeon.

Procedure for checking horse health and welfare

Watch out for:

- behavioural abnormalities: is the horse behaving in a way you consider abnormal? For example, a lively horse that is suddenly quiet should arouse suspicion;
- eating problems: quidding (dropping unchewed food from the mouth) points to teeth problems. Not eating concentrate feed may indicate another underlying problem. Also note drinking habits;
- coat: is the coat dull and listless? This is a reliable sign of trouble;
- eyes: bright alert eyes are a sign of good health. Eyes that look dull, or with a discharge, indicate that something is wrong;
- respiration: breathing difficulties or coughing should be acted upon immediately;
- dung: any abnormalities in dung should be noted (normal dung resembles round balls, which break on landing); and,
- any increase or decrease in temperature relative to normal.



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Checking vital signs

It is important to note the horse's normal TPR (temperature, pulse and respiration) so that you have something to compare readings with if you feel that the horse is off form. Take pulse and respiration readings first, before taking the temperature reading. This is important because placing a thermometer in the rectum can raise the horse's pulse and respiration rates.

Temperature

You will need a clinical thermometer, some vaseline and a piece of cotton wool. Tie the horse up securely or have someone hold him. Remove the thermometer from its case and shake it so that the mercury is below the scale. Lubricate the bulb of the thermometer with vaseline. Approach the horse at the shoulder and work back to the hindquarters. Stand close to the side of the hindquarters and raise the tail. Slide the bulb of the thermometer through the anus into the rectum to lie against the rectal wall. Do not prod the rectum wall with the thermometer and do not push it into a ball of faeces. Hold it in place for a minute and then remove, wipe clean and read the temperature from the scale. Clean the thermometer in cold antiseptic solution, dry it, shake it and return it to the case. Normal rectal temperature is 37.6–38.2 degrees Celsius or 99–100.5 degrees Fahrenheit. (Alternatively, you can buy a digital thermometer.)

Pulse rate

To take the pulse, you will need a watch with a second hand. Find the facial artery, which is close to the skin surface on the bottom jaw. Locate the tubular vessel on the lower edge of the jaw with your fingertips. Press gently until you feel the pulse. Count the number of beats in 15 seconds and multiply by four to obtain the pulse rate per minute. The normal resting rate is 35 to 45 beats per minute depending on the size, age and fitness of the horse.

Respiratory rate

Breathing is barely noticeable at rest in a healthy horse. Stand back from the horse





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and watch the movement of the rib cage or the flanks. Count the number of breaths in or out over 15 seconds and multiply by four. The normal respiratory rate at rest is eight to 16 breaths per minute.

The capillary refill test

The horse's gums should be pink and moist. Press gently on the gum above one of the top incisor teeth until it whitens. The colour should return immediately when you remove your finger. A delay suggests a reduction in blood volume or blood pressure due to shock, haemorrhage or dehydration.

Riding health indicators

Any behavioural problems that crop up while you are riding your horse/pony may also indicate ill-health:

- headshaking may be a sign of the onset of an allergy or problems in the mouth, while a dislike of being bridled points to teeth and mouth trouble;
- reluctance to go forward can mean that the horse has problems in his back or that his tack is not fitting well; and,
- horses run away from pain; if the horse starts to get strong and pull it may be a sign of a health problem.

Mental health

Horses can suffer from stress. Don't overlook the impact a horse's social interaction with other horses can have on his health. A stressful environment – such as a bully stabled next door or sharing a field, or even a busy stable yard – can leave a real impression on a sensitive horse. Also, moving yards, leaving an equine friend or such a friend moving on, competitions and unusual happenings in and around the yard can all influence a horse's health – just as stressful situations can affect humans.

Vaccination

The horse or pony should be up to date on essential influenza and tetanus vaccinations. Antibody protection levels can be measured simply where there is any concern. Discuss with your vet.



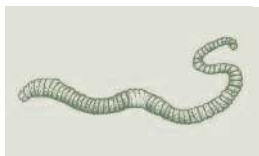


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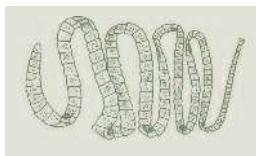
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PARASITE CONTROL

All horses and ponies suffer from internal parasites, the most common being small redworms, tapeworms, bots and roundworms. External parasites such as lice can also be an issue. The life cycle of parasites is such that horses become re-infested regularly, with some parasites having a straightforward life cycle relying solely on the horse, and a free-living stage on pasture or bedding. Other parasites, like bots, have a secondary host, in this case the bot fly. Tapeworms rely on the forage mite as well as the horse for survival.



Redworm.



Tape worm.



Bot fly larvae.

The effects of untreated parasite infestation can include weight loss, reduced performance, anaemia, diarrhoea, dull coat, pot belly, poor appetite, tail rubbing and even death if left untreated.

The goal of an effective de-worming programme should never be to eradicate any given parasite completely, but rather to minimise the risk of disease, control egg shedding, maintain effective anthelmintic (chemical wormer) control, and avoid development of anthelmintic resistance as much as possible. Faecal egg count tests assist in monitoring the effectiveness of a parasite control programme and permit the treatment only of horses with high worm burdens. This form of treatment should only be in place for horses over three years of age, and should still include targeted treatment of encysted small redworm in the autumn, and against tapeworm every six months, at the end of the housing season and at the end of the grazing season.

Faecal egg counting is where a sample of dung is sent to the laboratory to determine the presence and volume of eggs present. It is not possible to determine if there is an issue with tapeworm or with encysted small redworm in this way.



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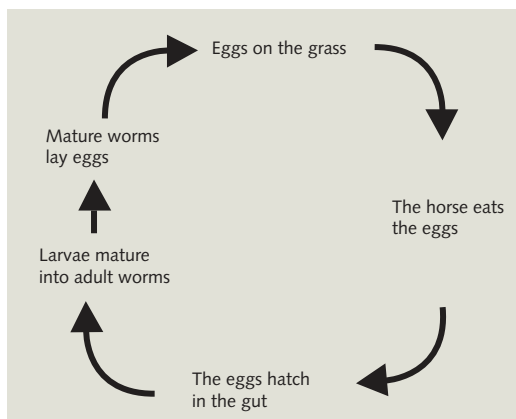
It is extremely important to read the product instructions with regard to suitability for use in pregnant and lactating mares and youngstock, and the effectiveness of the product against various parasites. Parasite control is complex and should be discussed with your vet.

Good grassland management, stable hygiene, not overstocking, dosing by weight, and treating new arrivals before turnout with existing stock all have a role in an effective parasite control programme.

Example: life cycle of large/small redworms

1. The horse ingests larvae from pasture or from bedding on the stable floor.
2. The larvae migrate through various parts of the body, reach maturity and lay their eggs in the horse's intestines.
3. The eggs are passed out with the horse's dung.
4. The larvae emerge from the eggs and migrate to the grass, so the cycle begins again.

Having a good worming programme will keep infestation numbers to a minimum. Parasite control is two-fold: grassland management; and, use of anthelmintics (worming medication).



Life cycle of the redworm.



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Grassland management

As a horse grazes they can eat immature adult parasites which have attached themselves to blades of grass. The horse's own dung maintains the supply of worms for himself and other horses on the same pasture. Several techniques are used to lower the amount of faecal contamination and reduce the likelihood of exposure to the horse.

1. Rotate the grazing area. Move horses from one field to another every month to maintain adequate grass cover. Electric fencing can subdivide pastures into smaller areas. In this way, the horse eats grass that does not contain excess larvae. The life cycle of the parasite can be broken where the host is removed frequently from contaminated pasture, as some eggs mature in six weeks.
2. Graze younger animals separately from older horses. Certain parasites survive primarily in horses less than two years old. The increased volume and variety of parasites associated with young horses simply expose adults to more worms. Also, put younger horses out on clean pasture where possible.
3. Do not overgraze and overstock pastures (stocking rate 1.5 horses/ha), as this forces horses to eat any remaining weeds, dirt, parasites, and wood. Overgrazed pastures mean that the few living plants left in the field are heavily contaminated with larvae.



Mixed grazing.



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4. Topping pasture or tight grazing exposes the base of grass blades to sunlight, which also helps to kill off a degree of the parasite population in prolonged hot weather.
5. Manually picking up droppings or using a pasture vacuum cleaner is very beneficial.
6. Mixed grazing with cattle or sheep can clean pastures too, as they have different eating and digestive patterns and most equine internal parasites cannot survive in the digestive systems of sheep and cattle. Besides the benefit for parasite control, it makes the most economical use of the pasture.

Stable sanitation

The stable is a potential site for ingesting parasites. If a horse is confined to a stable the manure is just as alive with hatching eggs as that found in the field. Daily picking and weekly stripping of bedding is desirable to decrease contamination.

Compost the solid waste cleaned from the stables for several months. The heat generated by the compost kills parasite eggs and some larvae. Store the bedding away from the stable area to discourage flies. Spreading manure on pasture immediately after stripping the bedding simply moves the parasites from the stable to pasture.

Don't feed horses on the ground, as this is a primary source for parasite ingestion. Keep clean water available at all times and remove any standing water. Scrub water bucket or drinkers daily. Empty water tanks and brush algae from the sides. Horses that defecate in their water bowls or buckets require extra attention.

Chemical control of internal parasites

Unfortunately, no single wormer controls all parasites. Different chemical groups of wormers vary in their efficacy in targeting different parasites. Different products also vary in the duration of their effectiveness. It is best to discuss the choice of parasite control products with your vet if you are unsure.



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Dosing guidelines:

- before worming, read the manufacturer's instructions carefully;
- weigh the horse to ensure accurate dosing or use a weigh tape;
- use faecal egg count testing at least twice a year to guide your choice of anthelmintic product in consultation with your vet;
- select a product that has activity against encysted small redworms in October/November and again in January/February;
- select a product that has activity against tapeworm at the end of the housing season and at the end of the grazing season;
- target bots after the first frost;
- rotate the chemical group of anthelmintics used on an annual basis;
- treat all new arrivals and keep them indoors for at least 24 hours after worming so that worms are not transferred onto clean pasture;
- record the date of dosing and the product used;
- treat all horses on the farm at the same time and with the same product;
- check products are suitable for use in young foals, pregnant mares and lactating mares; and,
- the two main methods of administering wormers are either through a paste given directly into the horse's mouth from a syringe, or in a powder form mixed through the feed, although in some cases the vet may administer using a stomach tube.

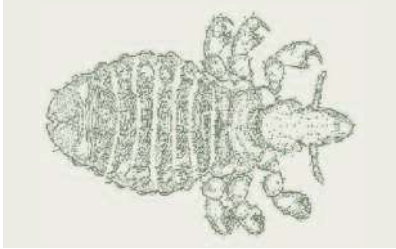




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Lice



Louse.

The louse is a parasite. There are two types: the sucking louse, which feeds on blood and tissue; and, the biting louse, which feeds on scurf from the coat.

Main signs:

- the horse is irritated, rubbing and biting himself;
- the coat looks scurfy and dull;
- the horse loses condition; and,
- cream-coloured eggs are found in the coat.

Treatment and prevention:

- apply louse powder to the coat; and,
- practice good stable management: lice are spread through grooming kits and clothing (numnahs) – clean these regularly.



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LAMINITIS

Laminitis can be a devastating disease to a horse/pony. It is usually, but not exclusively, associated with over-fat ponies on grass.

What to look for

Mild cases

The horse seems a little uncomfortable, shuffling from one foot to another when standing still. Lameness may be intermittent.

More severe cases

The horse is reluctant to walk at all or may even be lying down, sweating and in some distress. You may see a depression in the coronary band, which indicates movement of the pedal bone (inside the hoof). In most cases the feet will be hot and the digital pulse just underneath the side of the fetlock will be pounding.

Main signs of laminitis

The horse may:

- rest his weight on his hind feet;
- stretch out his front legs to reduce pressure on the front feet;
- be in obvious pain and reluctant to move; and,
- have heat in his feet.

Causes of laminitis

A number of situations may lead to the condition:

- too much rich grass: typically this is grass high in soluble carbohydrate in the spring and autumn;
- too much concentrated feed, which can occur when a horse breaks into a feed bin, or is given very large concentrate meals;
- obesity: overweight animals are more susceptible to laminitis;
- toxæmia: literally ‘blood poisoning’, where undesirable metabolic compounds



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circulate in the blood stream (can be caused by diarrhoea, peritonitis or metritis from a retained placenta after foaling);

- some drugs, particularly corticosteroids;
- stress may make horses more prone to developing laminitis because, when stressed, horses release higher levels of corticosteroid hormones that may have a similar effect to administered steroids;
- irregular shoeing;
- associated with horses suffering from Cushing's disease (hormonal imbalance);
- associated with horses suffering from high insulin levels, as seen in equine metabolic syndrome (EMS); and,
- less common causes include riding on hard surfaces and excessive weight bearing by one leg due to severe injury or lameness in the opposite leg.

What to do if a horse/pony has laminitis

1. Remove the suspect cause.
2. Call the vet immediately and follow their advice,

To prevent laminitis:

- trim feet regularly;
- restrict grazing, especially in spring;
- reduce exposure to causes of laminitis;
- do not allow the horse/pony to become obese;
- provide hay if the pony is stabled or in a bare paddock;
- use a muzzle for short periods if you are unable to strip graze or manage the pasture;
- feed a low carbohydrate, high fibre diet, and consider using a mineral and vitamin supplement to provide a balanced diet where the animal is being fed less than the recommended quantities of compound feed;
- increase workload before increasing feed;
- feed little and often, so as not to overload the stomach;
- do not turn the horse out on frosted paddocks; and,
- restrict grazing, especially in spring, of animals prone to laminitis.



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TACK

Comfortable and well-fitting tack results in a happy, contented animal that can perform at its best. Get professional advice on buying and fitting tack before you purchase, as it is expensive.

The first-time owner needs the following:

- bridle – complete with bit and reins;
- saddle – complete with stirrup leathers, irons and girth;
- numnah; and,
- a breastplate may be required.

Fitting the bridle

- Always untie the horse before removing the headcollar;
- place the reins of the bridle over the horse's head;
- keep control of the horse when bridling by re-fastening the headcollar around the neck (he should not be retied but the lead rope left hanging through the piece of string to prevent injury in case the horse decides to pull back);
- stand in close, just behind and to one side (preferably on the left side) of the horse's head;
- put your right hand under the horse's head and around to the offside approximately halfway down the horse's face;
- pass the bridle to your right hand and hold both the mid-sections of both cheek pieces;
- hold the bit with your thumb and first two fingers and open the horse's mouth by placing your thumb in the side of the mouth. This is the space where the bit lies as there are no teeth in this area and this prevents you from getting injured;
- when the horse opens his mouth, guide the bit in (be careful not to knock against the horse's teeth) by raising the bridle with the right hand;
- handle the ears carefully when slipping the headpiece over; and,



Parts of the bridle.





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- Be sure that the bridle is properly adjusted to fit the horse before you ride.

If the bridle is correctly fitted you should be able to:

- fit one finger between browband and ear;
- fit two fingers between cheek bone and noseband;
- see two wrinkles in the horse's lips when the bit is in the mouth (the horse should appear to be smiling); and,
- fit four fingers' width between cheek and throatlash.

When deciding on a bit, consider the bit that was used by the horse's previous owner, and the strength of the horse when riding. Ideally, all riders prefer to ride in a snaffle; however, certain horses do require stronger bits. Always get advice from a professional when choosing alternatives.



Parts of the saddle.

Saddlery

If you intend to use your horse for a variety of disciplines, or have yet to decide on a particular discipline, the general purpose saddle is the one to choose. It can be used for all disciplines: jumping, hunting, dressage, cross country, and hacking out. When buying a saddle, it is advisable to bring your horse to the tack shop if possible, or to have a member of staff call to you with a number of saddle options to get the one best suited to your horse. It will be better in the long run even if extra cost is incurred.



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If you are buying a secondhand saddle, make sure to check the stitching and check that the leather is neither split nor has holes in it. There should be three girth straps. When fastening the girth, use either the first and the second or the first and the third straps. This is important in the event of one strap breaking.

Buy good stirrup leathers (buffalo hide), steel irons and make sure the stirrup bars are open when riding. This is extremely important in the event of a fall, as the stirrup can break free from the saddle and the rider will not be dragged with one foot stuck in a stirrup iron.

Before saddling:

- carefully check the horse and tack;
- make sure all stitching on the stirrup leather, billet straps and girth buckles is secure;
- run up the stirrups before placing the saddle on the horse's back;
- position the girth across the seat;
- place the numnah high on the withers, and then slide it backwards onto the back (this smoothes the horse's hair); and,
- check the girth three times – after saddling, just before mounting, and after riding for a short distance.

Cleaning tack

It is important to keep your tack clean, as this prevents skin sores and helps to prevent tears in the leather.

Get into the habit of:

- cleaning the bit after every use;
- cleaning the saddle, bridle and girth (if leather) daily with a little warm water and saddle soap;
- oiling both the bridle and the saddle weekly;
- washing the numnah and girth (if not leather) regularly; and,
- checking the stitching of the bridle, reins, saddle and stirrup leathers when cleaning tack.





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RIDING OUT

Choosing the right headgear

Medical studies show that the most common riding-related injuries are to the head. Many of these could be prevented or be less severe if protective headgear is worn.

Protective headgear is a hat that stays on during a fall (not one that hits the ground before the rider). Protective hats cannot be pierced by a sharp object, and they also have extra padding inside to protect riders from concussion.



Appropriate headgear is essential.

Wear protective headgear that carries the appropriate approval rating, which can be checked with the governing body, Horse Sport Ireland, to ensure that you are wearing the headgear proven to be most effective in preventing head injuries.

Mounting and dismounting

- Never mount or dismount a horse in a barn or near fences, trees, or overhanging projections. Sidestepping and rearing mounts have injured riders who failed to take these precautions;
- a horse should stand quietly for mounting and dismounting. To ensure that the horse stands, lightly control his head with the reins;
- run up the stirrups immediately upon dismounting. The dangling stirrup may startle or annoy the horse. A dangling stirrup can catch in doorways and other projections while the horse is being led; and,
- after running up the stirrups, immediately bring the reins over the horse's head. In this position, the reins can be used for leading.



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Riding

- When riding, wear boots with proper heels to prevent your feet from slipping through the stirrups. Always wear protective headgear, properly fitted and fastened;
- wear a back protector when riding an unfamiliar horse or jumping;
- keep the horse under control and maintain a secure seat at all times. Horses are easily frightened by unusual objects and noises;
- until you know your horse, confine riding to an arena or other enclosed area. Ride in open spaces or unconfined areas only when you are familiar with the horse;
- if the horse becomes frightened, stay calm, speak to him quietly, steady him, and give him time to overcome his fear;
- hold your mount to a walk when going up or down a steep hill;
- do not fool around. Horseplay is dangerous to you, your friends and to those nearby;
- never ride your horse with just a headcollar; headcollars do not give enough control. Use a bridle;
- when riding on the road, ride on the shoulder and follow the rules of the road;
- never rush past riders who are riding at a slower gait. It startles both horses and riders and frequently causes accidents. Instead, approach slowly, indicate a desire to pass, and proceed cautiously;
- ride abreast of or stay a full horse's length from the horse in front to avoid the possibility of being kicked;
- you should be able to see the hind heels of the horse in front of you;
- never allow a horse to run to and from the stable. Walk the last distance home;
- when using spurs, be sure that your legs are steady enough so that you don't touch the horse with the spurs by mistake. If you are not sure, do not wear them;
- when your horse is frightened and tries to bolt, turn him in a circle and tighten the circle until he stops; and,
- dogs and horses are not always good companions. Keep your dog under control at all times.





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TRAVELLING AND LOADING



Always make sure your horsebox is in good condition.

The horsebox

Check your horsebox regularly for the following:

- check the couplings and brakes;
- check that there are no protruding objects;
- check for rusted and weakened door hinges;
- make sure that the lights and indicators are working;
- ensure that the tyres are within the legal requirement and that the pressure is correct;
- check for rotting or weakened floor boards – regularly pull up mats to check the floor underneath; and,
- ensure that the towing hitch is the correct height for the box, and that the trailer can be towed level.



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At servicing, ask the mechanic to check the springs and wheel bearings. The trailer should be of sufficient height to give the horse ample neck and head room.

Driving

When driving, always observe the following:

- secure all doors and the ramp;
- double-check all the connections (lights, brakes, hitch and safety chains);
- drive carefully, turn slowly, and start and stop slowly and steadily; and,
- look far ahead to avoid emergencies.

Loading and unloading

- Make sure the ground area behind and around the ramp gives safe footing before loading or unloading a horse;
- be sure that the ramp is level and steady, and doesn't move as the horse steps on it;
- use a headcollar and lead rope (at least five feet long) made of cotton rope. Do not use nylon ropes – they can be dangerous if the horse pulls back;
- always protect the horse's legs. Ensure that bandages/travelling boots extend over the coronary bands onto the hoof, and that they cover the heel area as well as the knees and hocks;
- put a tail bandage on your horse to protect from rubbing;
- if a horse is difficult to load, use a bridle, as this gives more control;
- if you have trouble loading or unloading, get experienced help;
- always stand to the side when closing and opening the ramp in case the horse has become free and backs out hurriedly;
- secure the rear chain or bar as soon as the horse is in the trailer and always before tying the horse. Be careful when doing this and stand to the side;
- always tie with a quick-release knot, or use panic snaps on the ties;
- when hauling only one horse in a two-horse trailer, load the horse on the driver's side. Try to distribute the weight of the load evenly. When hauling two horses in a two-horse trailer, load the heavier horse on the driver's side;





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- use rubber mats for secure footing and bedding (shavings or straw) to prevent splashing when the horse urinates;
- horses are like people – some get sick from motion. Adjust the feeding schedule to avoid travelling immediately after feeding. Feed smaller amounts more often if necessary;
- watch your feet and fingers when dropping the ramp and stand to the side;
- never undo the rear chain or bar before you untie your horse at his head. The horse may try to back out as soon as the ramp is down;
- use caution to back the horse out of the trailer straight and slightly towards the centre;
- if there are two horses in the trailer, have someone stand by the head of the second horse while the first one is backed off the trailer so that he doesn't think that he is free to back off also;
- if a horse proves dangerous in its exuberance to back off the trailer (plunging back before the rear chain or bar can be released) consider using the front ramp (the same rules apply);
- walk the horse to restore circulation before putting him in a stable, especially after a long journey;
- when the trailer is disconnected and parked, be sure to place blocks behind the wheels; and,
- never load a horse in an unhitched trailer.

This handbook has been produced by the Teagasc Equine Specialist Unit.



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