

## **SAFETY WITH HORSES – AN INTRODUCTION**

Equine leisure pursuits are amongst the most enjoyable and satisfying around. However, there are several basic facts to bear mind at all times when riding or handling horses.

### **Being Around Horses**

The most important factor to remember is that horses are not inanimate objects. They are living, breathing and thinking beings. Whilst generally obedient and often reliable, they have minds of their own but are not capable of rational, reasoned thinking. What is perfectly acceptable and non-threatening to your equine friend one day can overnight become the most frightening thing ever encountered. Expect the unexpected and always concentrate on what you and your horse are doing.

Never forget too, that the horse has the ability to inflict serious injury at both ends! A bite from horse teeth at the front end can be very painful, whilst a kick from the other end can have disastrous consequences. Each hoof too has the unerring ability to stand precisely and seemingly deliberately, on those fragile human bones.

Make sure your horse is aware of your presence; speak on approach, which should not be from the rear! Ideally protective headgear and robust footwear should be worn at all times. A lightweight pair of gloves too can make a big difference to your comfort.

### **Starting Riding**

When you decide to ride horses it is strongly recommended that you have lessons at a riding school approved by ABRIS, BHS, TRSS or the Pony Club. All the instructors should be qualified and able to prove it if asked. An approved riding school has to meet certain standards of care for both humans and horses. Good signs to look out for are a clean, tidy yard, neatly turned out staff, healthy looking horses and ponies and tack which is clean, well cared for and in good condition.

For your first lessons it should be possible to hire a suitable riding hat and body protector. These items are essential, but can be expensive, so hiring is ideal until you decide whether or not you are going to carry on. Approved riding schools generally have a good selection of both available to hire at nominal cost. Under no circumstances should you ride without protective headgear.

Your choice of footwear is also most important. Sturdy shoes or boots with a small heel to prevent the foot from slipping through the stirrup are fine. Wellington boots and trainers are not – they give no support and can slip through the stirrup when you lose your balance. Best of all are boots specifically made with riding in mind.

Well fitting jeans and casual trousers which don't ride up the leg (very painful!) are acceptable. A lightweight waterproof jacket for inclement weather, plus a pair of riding gloves (available from £2.50p upwards) complete your outfit.

Fancy jewellery should be left at home – it can get caught up in a variety of situations.

## **Riding on the Roads**

When you progress to riding on the roads, for insurance purposes it is a legal requirement that both horse and rider are wearing high visibility gear. There is an ever increasing choice of articles on offer. More is definitely better in this case.

A working knowledge of the Highway Code is essential and gaining your Riding and Road Safety Certificate through the BHS or Pony Club ensures thorough training in practice and theory.

If for any reason you have to lead a horse along a road, always use a bridle and wear high visibility clothing and protective headgear.

There are numerous opportunities to gain experience and knowledge: the BHS, Pony Club and Riding Clubs are just three. The learning curve can be as steep or relaxed as desired, with the chance to gain 'horsey' qualifications too.

## **Buying Your Own Horse**

By now you are possibly looking to buy your own horse. An exciting and worrying time. How do you make the right choice? Always take someone with lots of experience with you when you try out a horse for the first time. Your instructor is ideal as he or she will know your capabilities. A second opinion is always useful - how many people do you know have bought something totally unsuitable? Quiz the vendor fully (have a list of questions ready beforehand – you are bound to forget something vital) before you arrange to view the horse. This can save many hours of wasted travelling.

When you decide to make a purchase, this should be subject to the horse passing a veterinary examination tailored to your needs and expectations of the animal. Plenty can go wrong after you have paid your money: there is no point in buying an existing and problem.

Keeping your first horse at livery at an approved establishment ensures that you will have support and assistance throughout the initial wonderful and nerve wracking period of horse ownership.

## **Conclusion**

There are literally hundreds of publications dealing with all these subjects in great depth. This article is designed to impart some basic health and safety guidelines.

Safety with horses is largely a matter of commonsense. The following points are worth remembering:

*Be realistic regarding your own and your horses capabilities*

*Be aware of potential dangers (real or imagined)*

*Be suitably attired in protective, high visibility gear*

*Be confident, relaxed but 'switched on'.*

*Be courteous and considerate to others at all times*

*Be conscious that your horse does not think like you!*

*Be grateful for assistance when needed*

*Be happy - you are doing this because you enjoy it!*

***BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY***