



'Pastures and Horses: Routine Care Information

Your horses enjoy the good life in pasture ... but does that mean their needs are nonexistent? Find out what routine care you should be providing.

By Sue Weaver

Horse Safety Basics

Tending to a herd of equines in pasture can be a risky chore.

In every herd of every size, there is a top ranking boss horse and a poor, pitiful bottom-dweller.

Each remaining herd member ranks someplace in between in the hierarchy or “pecking order.”

Higher ups continually assert their authority over low-ranking individuals—and when a human enters the equation, watch out!

A human afoot can be (and often is) run down and injured when assertive herd members discipline their subordinates.

To eliminate the inherent dangers of working with horses in pasture, here are a few tips:

Understand Herd Dynamics

Which horses are bosses?

They are easily identified as the chasers, kickers, biters—the aggressive ones threatening their peers with pinned ears and slinging heads.

Which horses are outcasts?

Those that are banished to the fringe of the herd, sometimes battered, often jumpy and frequently on the fly.

Try to avoid both, since the top horses are likely to discipline other horses while the lowest in the pecking order are targeted for dominance.

Dress the Part

For your safety, wear boots or stout leather work shoes; no bare feet, sandals or sneakers.

Jeans and a sturdy shirt will also offer protection.

If you'll be leading a horse away from the herd, wear gloves; if he's accosted and you have to hang on, burn glove leather instead of your hands.

Be certain your headgear doesn't obstruct your vision; snugged-up parka hoods and some caps can do just that.

Entering and Exiting the Herd

Be certain all the horses know you're there; speak to them, sing or whistle.

Constantly observe the body language of every horse in your vicinity.

Stay alert for aggression toward you or toward any horses you interact with.

Know where boss horses and individuals known to dislike humans are at all times.



Herd stallions and mares with tiny foals sometimes behave erratically; if in doubt, give them wide berth. Watch for brawls, even distant ones, which can escalate into chain reactions encompassing you and your horse.

Don't lead a horse past boss horses or bullies. If you can't avoid them and one attacks a horse you're leading, be prepared to defend him—or to release him and get out of the way.

It's a good idea to teach horses to lead using a rope or hay string looped around the neck. Then if you must do a quick release, the freed horse won't be encumbered by a trailing lead.

Because low-ranking herd members are the ones most likely to be chased, don't allow them to bunch up around you, nor let them accompany a horse you are leading, especially if you must pass by boss horses.

And be especially careful near gateways, where horses may crowd; also use caution in enclosed spaces like barn lots and loafing sheds, where you could be easily cornered.

Don't Carry Treats Into A Herd

Nothing transforms a normally sedate group of horses into a shoving, head-slugging, ear-pinning, heel-flinging, milling mob of fiends quicker than a bucket of grain or a few treats—and if you're holding the goodies, you'll be smack dab in the middle of their discord.

Try not to feed a single horse in a group situation.

If you feed hay, it's best to pitch it to the herd from a safe distance, outside the pasture fencing. Make sure you provide enough hay—well spaced—so all herd members can eat.

Catching Horses

The less time you spend amongst the herd catching a horse, the safer you'll be.

Quite a few horses can be easily nabbed if they're wearing halters, but are practically uncatchable when they're not. If you must leave halters on horses that are turned out, use a breakaway style—commercial or homemade—which will break or release if caught on something.

Otherwise, it's best to leave halters off your pastured horses.

Pasture or stall: Which is best? Experts generally say pasture under most circumstances.

But pasture-kept horses require more care than they sometimes get. Tending a pastured equine sounds easier and quicker than caring for a stabled one—less expensive, too.

But a stabled horse in his controlled environment is exposed to fewer risks than his pasture-kept pals. He's exposed to fewer parasites and biting bugs. His diet can be carefully monitored. And because he's stalled, he's more readily accessible than a horse grazing at the far side of an 80-acre pasture.

Yet pastured horses are generally happier than their stabled kin. Pastured, they respond to the same circadian rhythms that compel feral horses to feed now, rest later, then feed again. Their primary diet is grass: nature's perfect horse food. Their hooves and muscles grow strong as they traverse their pasture to graze and drink. They savor the company of other horses, forming fast friendships. They roll when they want, loaf, race or play-fight if they choose.

In this more natural setting they behave ... like horses. And for a horse's mind, that's a very good thing.

However idyllic that image seems, your horse won't thrive on pasture unless he's properly cared for.

He can't simply be turned out and checked on whenever it's convenient.

He'll require a suitably-sized, safely and securely fenced meadow of quality grass; ready access to shelter; clean free-choice water; supplements such as salt, vitamins and minerals and sometimes additional feed; protection from biting flies and other insect pests; companionship and daily monitoring along with routine deworming, hoof and coat care.



Living Arrangements

All pastures are not created equal. Be certain those your horses graze provide enough high quality forage to meet nutritional needs.

Lush but weedy pasture, meadows of tall, bitter grasses and grassland planted with vegetation unpalatable to horses may look ripe for grazing yet if pastured there, horses can't thrive.

Meadows must not be overgrazed. Depending on where you live and the condition of your pasture, it might take one acre or 30 to nourish your horses through grazing season.

If you're unsure about your pasture—whether its grasses will nourish your horses or if it's big enough, or how to maintain it—consult your county agricultural agent for up-to-date information pertinent to your area and read "Grazing the Surface" by Carol Ekarius.

Many species of plants are toxic to horses, so it's recommended that you inquire about those that grow in your region. Then, go on a search-and-destroy mission.

Before committing your horses to pasture, be certain all fencing and gates are safe.

Walk every fence line, making repairs as needed. Replace horse-unfriendly materials such as barbed wire. If fences rely on electric current, make certain fence chargers are adequate and working. If the pasture is fenced with wire, attach strips of light-hued cloth or high-visibility tape to the top strand; this makes the fencing more visible to horses. For even greater visibility, knot a "fence flag" every few feet around the entire pasture perimeter.

Cover from nature's occasional unpleasantness, be it searing heat, howling winds, hail, early snow or biting bugs, is essential.

In warmer climates, natural shelter such as lush mature trees for shade and dense hedges or rock outcroppings for windbreak, may be sufficient.

However, most pastured horses require access to man-made shelter. Shelters should be sound and roomy enough to accommodate every individual in the herd while providing several exits so low-ranking members can't be cornered by cranky superiors.

Pastured horses need free access to clean drinking water. Although thoughts of ponds and bubbling brooks spring to mind, these are not necessarily best solutions.

Natural water sources are often polluted, if not by tainted ground water or chemical run-off, then by the feces of birds, deer, raccoons, opossums and other creatures that may expose your horses to a host of serious health problems. Even if your pasture contains a pond or stream, provide an automatic waterer or a watering trough that is monitored daily and scrubbed frequently. You'll find most horses prefer it.

Feeding Time

Lactating mares, youngsters, old horses and poor keepers on grass will usually require supplementary feeding.

And as spring's lush grazing gives way to less nutritious summer growth, or when pastures are overgrazed, daily rations of hay, grain or complete feed may be needed to keep your horses fit. On dry lots, this will of course be essential.

All horses need access to free choice equine-specific minerals, provided loose in a feeder or as a crumbly block. Hard salt blocks designed for cattle aren't enough. Pelleted equine vitamin supplements can be hand-fed or added to a portion of grain.

Pasture Problems

Horses plagued by gnats, flies and mosquitoes may camp in their shelters instead of grazing.

Dealing with Ticks

Itchy ticks and tick lesions cause pastured horses to ferociously rub trees, fences and shelter walls, abrading throats, necks and hindquarters and destroying their manes and tails.



Severe infestations produce anemia, loss of appetite and depression. And ticks can infect any horse—or horse owner—with Lyme disease, ehrlichiosis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever and tick-bite paralysis. Standard insect solutions rarely faze these rugged pests.

What to do?

Treat horses with power-packed permethrin-based products in spot-on, spritz or wipe on formulations. Ticks aren't repelled by DEET, but Pyrethrin-based products work tolerably well.

Holistic horse owners hand-pick ticks. Wear gloves. Drop detached ticks into a jar of soapy water, then dispose of tick-laden liquid by burying it or flushing it down the toilet. To remove a tick, grasp it as close to its host's skin as possible using fingers or forceps. Don't squeeze. Apply slow, steady, upward pressure until the tick comes away intact. Itchy fly bites and embedded ticks cause them to rub against trees, fences and buildings, wrecking their manes and tails, scraping their hides and injuring their eyes.

Many of these pests spread disease. While appropriate shelter helps, depending on the bug population in your locale, pastured horses may require insect protection in the form of fly masks and sheets, as well as spot-on-applied, spray or feed-through fly control products. Ticks and bot fly eggs need to be removed daily. Particularly bug-beset horses can be stabled days and turned out overnight.

Because they graze amidst the manure of other horses, pastured horses are generally more prone to worm infestation than their stabled chums are.

Horses pastured together should all be on the same deworming schedule, typically every six to eight weeks. However, your vet might advise more frequent deworming based on number of horses in the pasture, how well the pasture is managed/cleaned, how often new horses are introduced into the herd, along with other factors such as horse age(s) and regional climate.

You'll also find coat care is harder afield. Coats sunburn and fade, manes are rubbed and tails collect burrs.

In addition, pastured horses' hooves demand the same care stalled horses do—sometimes more.

They should be cleaned and examined daily, trimmed or shod on schedule. Rocky pastures can bruise horses' soles, making them gimpy and grouchy.

While barefoot is better for pastured horses, some horses require shoes and possibly even pads to keep them comfortable and sound. However, think twice about putting shoes on your horses' hind feet. If a horse gets a hard kick from a shod pasture buddy—especially a blow that lands on a nonfleshy area of the leg—you could be in for a huge vet bill and an extremely long lay-up (or worse).

Special needs may arise. Your Paint's pink nose sunburns if not sunscreen-treated twice daily. Your heat-sensitive Thoroughbred suffers if you don't hose her down on days the mercury soars. You have to doctor a scrape or treat a weepy eye. Your stocking-legged horse's pasterns erupt in icky, raw scratches lesions. And to be happy, a horse needs at least one equine buddy to kibitz with and swish away the flies.

So turn your horses out to pasture, sit back and relax? Not exactly. Yet because pasture life is so beneficial for horses, the extra care may be worth your time and trouble.

Routine Care

Establish a pasture-care schedule and follow it.

A typical once or twice daily protocol would be to remove fly masks, sheets or any other clothing and inspect horses carefully, checking for cuts, scrapes, sunburn, rashes, bumps, hoof cracks or loose shoes, weepy eyes, and debris or burrs in ears, hides, manes and tails.

Evaluate your horses' movement. Treat any injuries, unsnarl manes and tail tangles or mats. Pick hooves, applying hoof dressing if needed. Spritz or pour on fly and tick repellent; remove any bot fly eggs or ticks.

After taking care of your horses, perform field surveillance. Check the water supply. Be certain automatic waterers are functioning and tidy. Inspect water tanks, cleaning them before refilling. Do the same for loose mineral feeders. Next, inspect electric fence chargers and then walk along the fence line, making necessary repairs. Finally, do a quick sweep of



shelters, inside and out. Mist with insecticide and zap bug nests. Remove accumulated manure.

On a weekly basis, carefully inspect all shelters, combing them for hazards and mending any you find. Strip soiled bedding and replace it with fresh. Every four to eight weeks (or as recommended by your vet and farrier), perform essential health care including deworming and hoof care.

A lot of effort? Maybe so. But your pastured horses will thank you for it.

And when they are out in the meadow grazing or snoozing under a sweeping shade tree, tails gently wisping away flies, you'll know they are happy horses. And that's what responsible horsekeeping is all about.

About the Author: Sue Weaver is a freelance writer and horsekeeper based in Arkansas.

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