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A Tradition of Leadership and Excellence in Equine Medicine

The Owner's Role in Wound Care **Mark D. Hope, D.V.M.**

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As most of us know, horses seem destined to hurt themselves one way or another. Lacerations are a common occurrence; especially if the horse is due to be sold in the next sale. A skin wound can be caused by either blunt or sharp trauma; and should be cared for quickly to optimize the healing process. First aid, veterinarian consultation or treatment, and prescribed wound care are all important factors in laceration repair.

When an owner encounters a wound on their horse, they should remember three goals of first aid, which are: preventing further injury, slowing blood loss, and minimizing contamination. Horses are often very excitable after being hurt so getting them into a quiet environment such as a dark stall is important. Even though it would be rare for a horse to bleed to death from a skin wound, many seem to bleed profusely. Applying a clean, dry dressing with moderate pressure can control most of these lacerations. The use of a tourniquet above leg wounds is discouraged by most veterinarians, due to improper application that can do more harm than good. If a laceration is contaminated by soil, washing the wound lightly with a water hose can be beneficial in minimizing infection. Covering the wound with a clean, dry dressing will also prevent further contamination.

Whether a laceration requires the attention of a veterinarian depends on use of the horse; location, severity, and age of the wound; suspected injury to deeper structures; and desired cosmetic result. Usually the experience of the owner with wounds and the use of the animal dictate whether a veterinarian is called; however, even the smallest cut over a tendon or joint can be dangerous. In general, there is an average golden period of eight hours before a wound becomes too contaminated to suture closed immediately. If an owner does want a laceration examined and/or repaired by a veterinarian, it is recommended to call quickly and avoid applying any topical wound products to the injury. It is also important that the veterinarian knows the tetanus vaccination history of the horse. The veterinarian has to consider several factors before determining whether a wound can be sutured closed or treated as an open wound. The goal will always be to optimize the healing of the injury.

If a veterinarian has treated your horse for a laceration, it is important to follow their recommended wound care instructions. Antibiotics are often prescribed due to the environment the horse lives in. If a wound has been closed with sutures, the site should remain as dry as possible and covered with a bandage if on a leg. Open wounds should be cleaned frequently. Flies are a big concern this time of year and control should be maintained around the wound. Above all else, observing sutured and open lacerations for signs of infection will determine how fast the injury will heal. If such complications occur, let the veterinarian know.

Since it would be impractical to have all our horses live in a bubble, we will have to suffer through their propensity to hurt themselves. However, quick and sufficient attention will make sure that your horse's battle scars remain small and heal quickly.