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To Call... or not to Call....do I have an Emergency?

by Reggie Tschorn DVM (original owner of Arlington Equine, first published in *Creature's Corner News*)

What is an Emergency?

What conditions require immediate veterinary attention, and what are things that can wait?

First and foremost, know how to take your horses vital signs. Heart rate, temperature, respiration rate, gut sounds, capillary refill time, and pulse can be major indicators of life threatening conditions. Have your vet show you how to assess these basic parameters and write down what is normal for your horse when he is healthy. Pain and shock will alter these values so when you have an emergency, you need to be able to compare the values between ordinary, abnormal or an urgent situation. Your ability to give this information to your vet over the phone can help them decide whether the situation is critical and needs immediate emergency attention, or whether it can wait for a few hours. Don't count on just being able to look at your horse to make a decision to call the vet. Some horses that are actually in shock can appear quiet and not terribly painful on outward examination.

When you have a major medical calamity, it's usually pretty easy to determine when you need assistance. Major bleeding from wounds or intense pain in your animal make most owners rush to the phone. However, what are some of the other things that can happen that can be time critical, but may not be obviously serious at the time? Here is a short list of some of the conditions that sometimes don't look too serious, but can have dire consequences. These are all circumstances that warrant at least a phone call to your vet.

- Colic... This is one of those ailments that often gets worse when untreated. The first signs are often a horse that is off his feed, but that can quickly progress to noticeable abdominal pain, pawing, kicking, sweating and rolling. Many owners try giving pain relievers such as Bute or Banamine as a first attempt at treatment. The problem with that is, if the horse does not respond and the vet is called, the medication can drastically alter the horse's vital signs making it very difficult to evaluate just how serious the condition is. In colic cases where surgical intervention is an option, it is time critical to make that call before there is catastrophic damage done to the intestine from rupture.
- !● Punctures...don't wait on these! There are many times a wound can look like a simple cut or scrape, but actually have a deep hole or pocket under it. Nasty bacteria can start multiply and create an infection that is very, very difficult to deal with.
- !● Eyes...Scrapes or abrasions to the cornea of the eye can be very serious. Please resist the temptation to treat with the old tube of medication that 'worked so well' last year when your horse had runny eyes from fly irritation. Early intervention of eye problems can prevent complete loss of an eye, or vision limiting scarring.

The best scenario for the horse (and the owner) is to have a regular veterinarian who is familiar with your horse, and your location, as well as your particular needs- financial and otherwise. If an emergency occurs, you and your vet will be better prepared to decide on the appropriate options for all of you. If a medical situation comes up that you are unsure about, always call and ask!!

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