

Ask A Vet: First Horse Safety Tips

Sunday, September 6, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

At the age of 54, I am considering buying my first horse. One concern I have is the horse suddenly spooking and injuring itself or me. How can I prevent this?

Dear Reader,

I would like to congratulate you on considering purchasing a horse. Many adults have harbored a desire for equine companionship their whole lives and finally are able to realize it later in life. First, let me say that the best advice would be for you to develop a relationship with a reputable trainer or experienced horse friend who can guide you through the selection and purchasing process. Finding the right horse for you can be a daunting and challenging task. Someone who "knows the ropes" would be invaluable. This person (or people) would be able to guide you toward a horse that is less likely to spook and may also be able to help with the training process for horse and rider that is inevitable with a new purchase.

You may have noticed that I said "less likely to spook". All horses are by nature primarily flight animals. In a fearful situation their instinctual tendency is to get away from the fear inducing "danger". After all, horses in the wild depend on this behavioral trait for their survival. These are herbivores, not carnivores. Prey animals which use flight as their primary defense. Even the most docile horse may be startled into a sudden movement, dictated by instinct, which could injure the animal or person interacting with him. While fear is inherent to all horses, some individuals can have a more or less fearful personality. This is referred to as the "fearfulness temperament" and is consistent throughout the horse's life. A horse's fearfulness temperament can be detected and measured as young as 8 months of age according to Lea Lansade, PhD in a 2008 study. However, why this is so is up for debate. Is fearfulness a genetic trait or a learned behavior from the mare? While the genetic link is still being studied, we do know that young foals who see that their mothers accept frightening stimuli are calmer when exposed to that same stimuli themselves weeks later. Also, horses living with other horses in a social group, frequent feedings or forage available all day, and regular sensory stimuli (loud noises, music, different objects introduced regularly) all seem to reduce fear reactions. Handling a horse (putting a halter on, leading the horse, grooming) daily can reduce fearful reactions to frightening stimuli.

Find a reputable trainer to teach you two basic concepts. How to read a horse's body language to understand what he is thinking. And how to use the notion of establishing your dominance over your horse by invoking the rules and body language of this unique herd animal. Essentially, by telling the horse when and where he can move. Once any horse owner, novice or expert, understands these concepts, they can begin to truly enjoy their equine companions.

-Dr. Wade Hammond