

# Competition first aid

By Matt Hanks MRCVS of Central Equine Vets

Competing horses are often pushed to their limits and accidents can happen. Here is a run-down of common injuries and how to deal with them.



Cooling the horse down

**Broken legs** - This is by far the worst thing that can happen to a competition horse. The best thing to do is keep your horse still and seek veterinary attention. Sometimes, the fracture may not be obvious and require x-rays to confirm a break. If the bone is not displaced, such as with a crack, then there is a possibility things can be repaired. I recently dealt with a horse that had fractured its forearm from being kicked; the horse was immobilised in a stable for six weeks and seems to be doing very well.

**Hematomas** - these look a lot worse than they really are. Muscle is very vascular and a blow from hitting a fence or being kicked by another horse can result in spectacular swellings over muscle bellies. The important thing is to confirm that the swelling is only bruising and not something more sinister such as a fracture as both can cause massive swelling. Horses with hematomas are usually

not very uncomfortable and able to weight bear properly on their limbs and often walk without lameness.

**Tendon injuries** - race horses and horses that jump are prone to tendon or ligament damage. The important thing here is to stop the horse moving until it has been examined by a veterinary surgeon. The vet can use various contraptions such as a 'Kimzey' splint which reduces tension on the affected tendon and so minimises further damage. Cold hosing and anti-inflammatories such as 'bute' are also very important. Ultrasound can be used to confirm exactly what structure has been damaged but this is best done 7-10 days after the injury.

**Wounds** - these can vary from mild to severe. Mild wounds may not even stop you competing but, whether small or large, the horse should remain comfortable. Beware the small wound that causes

a big lameness. All wounds need to be decontaminated with an antiseptic such as chlorohexidine. Never use disinfectants on skin as they are designed for surfaces and not living tissue. Once the wound is cleaned, dress it using plenty of padding such as cotton wool and get your vet to check it as soon as possible. Remember that padded dressings must never get wet or they will tighten around the leg and cause a great deal of damage. Any dressings that get wet must be removed and replaced.

**Overheating** - rarely a problem in Scotland but if your horse appears to be overheating after a hot cross country event, wash him or her down with cool (not ice cold) water and then sweat scrape this off. The idea is to use the evaporation of the water to cool your horse down. Only use cool water for about 10-15 minutes and keep your horse walking to promote lactic acid removal. It has been shown that over-cooling the skin can drive the blood into the body's core and so keep the core hot despite your best efforts.

At most competitions there are veterinary surgeons on duty ready to assist you in the event of an accident. Make yourself familiar with how to contact them before you need to do so in an emergency. Above all, have fun and please don't panic if your horse has an accident. A level-headed calm manner will not only help you take in what needs to be done but also helps to keep your horse calm. For any information regarding first aid or if you would like Central Equine

**A first aid kit is always a good idea and it doesn't have to be large. The key items are:**

- Chlorohexidine for cleaning wounds
- Wound pads or towels to cover a heavily bleeding wound
- Conforming cotton wool bandage as a base layer for your dressing
- Rolls of cotton wool - any brand will do as long as they are big rolls
- Cohesive bandage
- Scissors
- Head torch



Leg wound

Vets to give a free talk to your group, please give us a call on 0131 6645606



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