

What to do, what *not* to do

A step-by-step guide to evaluating and treating common equine injuries

By JENNIFER O. BRYANT

I once knew a horse owner who cheerfully admitted that she was useless in the face of crisis. If one of her horses became sick or injured, she said, "I'm like Don Knotts," referring to the comedian. "I panic and wave my arms. Somebody else has to step in."

I chuckled at this depiction at the time, but in truth somebody else isn't always there to step in. You don't have to be a veterinarian, but you do need to know whether calling the vet is necessary—and if it's not, what to do. In some cases, such as a serious injury, it's also important that you know what to do until help arrives.

Even the healthiest horse suffers the occasional scrape or gash. If you went out to the pasture today and found your horse bleeding, would you know what to do?

What kind?

"The first thing to do is to evaluate what kind of wound it is," said Dave MacDonald, D.V.M. MacDonald is a staff surgeon at Pioneer Equine Hospital in Oakdale, California, an eight-veterinarian practice north of the San Francisco Bay Area that treats many Western working and show horses.

These are the most common types of equine wounds:

- **Open (laceration):** the classic "cut." Edges can be clean (like a knife wound) or jagged (torn on barbed wire or a protruding nail). A superfi-

cial laceration involves only the outermost layers of skin. In more serious lacerations, the deeper skin layers and even muscles, tendons and ligaments can be injured or severed.

- **Closed (bruise):** technically, a contusion. The wound is subcutaneous (under the skin), with no surface damage. Bruises on your own skin generally are easy to see (the telltale dark stain is subcutaneous bleeding), but you may be hard-pressed to spot a bruise on your horse. Fortunately, horses suffer bruising relatively rarely—although bruises to the soles of the feet, often caused by stepping on stones or other objects, aren't uncommon.

- **Puncture:** caused by penetration by a nail, wood splinter or other sharp object. The hole may be tiny or even invisible, with little or no external bleeding to reveal its location. Even though it may look innocuous, a puncture is the most serious type of wound, according to MacDon-

ald, because that little hole quickly closes over, creating an anaerobic (without oxygen) environment in which dangerous tetanus bacteria thrive (more on tetanus later).

- **Abrasion:** rope burns and similar injuries, in which hair and the outermost layer of skin are scraped off. A rope burn on a joint or other high-mobility area may be difficult to heal because the area constantly re-opens and bleeds or oozes.

Now that you've figured out what type of wound you're dealing with, it's time to assess it.

How bad?

A puncture wound is always serious. In the case of a laceration, a superficial wound is much less serious than one in which deeper skin layers, muscle, tendons or ligaments are affected.

"Obviously, different people have different levels of tolerance for probing a wound," said MacDonald. "Sometimes the seriousness of a wound is fairly obvious. Other times, you have to look more closely. If you're not sure, consult your veterinarian."

Most superficial lacerations and minor abrasions require minimum treatment.

Puncture wounds, lacerations that involve deeper soft-tissue layers, major contusions (especially if they're

