

INFORMATION SHEET

Horses on farms

Many farms use horses for recreational and work related purposes. Given their size, speed and unpredictability in some circumstances, horses can cause serious injury if they are not ridden or handled safely.

Horses will run when frightened and their instincts and senses must be taken into consideration during handling as incidents can easily happen if they are upset or startled – whether by workers, sudden movements, unfamiliar objects, or unexpected noises.

Hazards from working with horses

Common hazards and causes of injury include:

- riders being thrown or falling from the horse
- horses crushing riders in a fall
- horses kicking workers
- riders becoming entangled in stirrups and being dragged along the ground.

Injuries can also occur from the rider striking or being crushed against objects, such as tree branches or fences, or from being stepped on or bitten by a horse. In some instances, serious injuries, including those to the head or spine, can have life-changing consequences.

Those at greatest risk of injury include:

- workers who do not have sufficient knowledge, skills and experience with riding or handling horses
- inexperienced handlers and riders, as they may not have developed their skills fully and lack the strength required to control a horse for riding or handling tasks
- riders mustering stock due to the rough and hilly ground this work generally takes place on and the speed the horse can be ridden.

Reducing the risk

The person conducting the business or undertaking (PCBU) has a duty of care to eliminate the risks in the workplace, including those relating to the use of horses. Where that is not reasonably practicable, risks must be minimised so far as is reasonably practicable.

The *Work Health and Safety Act 2020* introduced the term 'person conducting a business or undertaking' (PCBU), which broadens the traditional definition of 'employer'.

The person conducting the business (e.g. a self-employed farmer, each partner in a partnership, or a company) has a duty to ensure the health and safety of workers, including contractors, and others (e.g. visitors).

Health and safety tasks can be delegated (e.g. to managers and supervisors), but the PCBU has the overall responsibility for ensuring work health and safety.

Workers should stay at least two metres away from the hindquarters of a horse to reduce the risk of being kicked. If a worker has to be close to a horse, they should be right up close to reduce the amount of power the horse can deliver in a kick.

Work on horseback

Before assigning work to be undertaken on horseback, workers should be:

- assessed to determine if they are a beginner, competent rider or somewhere in-between
- treated as novice riders unless they can prove otherwise
- only allowed to carry out farm work with a horse if they have the necessary experience
- given a horse that matches their age, size, experience and riding ability; the horse should be selected by a qualified and experienced person
- provided with equipment that is in good repair and fits the horse comfortably (e.g. bridles, bits, saddles, and girths)
 - saddles, stirrup leathers, stirrup irons, bridles and bits should be checked to ensure they are well maintained and adjusted for fit
 - tack should be clean and supple as horse sweat can rot stitching and leather
- provided with personal protective equipment (PPE) and instructed that it is to be worn, including:
 - a correctly adjusted and fitted helmet to be worn where there is a risk of head injury
 - gloves
 - riding boots
 - sturdy, closed boots or shoes should be worn by horse handlers and stable hands.

Riding

Most riding injuries happen from falls. Falling from a horse can cause serious injuries, such as broken bones, neck and head injuries and may even be fatal.

To reduce the chance of falling from the horse, workers should:

- be provided with information about the best routes to take, 'no-go' zones and what tasks are suitable for using horses; a map of the farm that identifies which areas are unsafe should be provided to new workers
- learn how to control their horse before leaving the safety of the lesson environment
- if a horse is likely to buck, saddle it and give it some exercise prior to mounting
- always check the girth strap is tight before getting on the horse
- always remain alert and in a position of control when handling, riding or supervising a horse
- only adjust equipment from the ground and ask for assistance to adjust the girth strap and stirrup length

- kick their feet out of the stirrups if riding through water or bush, in case of a fall
- avoid galloping close to another animal, as this puts the rider and horse at risk; where possible, the horse's shoulder point (wither) should be kept in front of the other animal
- be aware of surroundings; riding under low-slung wires or clotheslines should be avoided and care taken when riding under gate caps in stockyards or low branches
- take care when riding in slippery or boggy conditions
- slow down when riding downhill and lean back in the saddle
- stay calm while riding, especially if the horse slips or falls and let the horse 'find its feet'; if dismounted and the horse slips or falls, the worker should check the horse is not hurt before remounting from solid ground
- get off and lead the horse in difficult terrain, such as narrow passes, paths and tracks, as this may be safer than riding
- if a horse bolts in an unconfined area, gradually circle the horse by applying pressure to one rein until the horse is under control.

If a horse is behaving badly when ridden or handled on the ground (e.g. bucks, bolts or rears), it is best to dismount if riding and have the horse assessed by a competent person to determine the cause and how the behaviour should be addressed.

Riding horses on the road

Horses can be easily frightened by large, noisy vehicles and other objects they are not familiar with. Motorists often do not understand horse behaviour and may drive too fast or close to the horse when passing.

Where possible, horses and vehicles should be kept apart, although there may be times when horses have to go on the road, such as getting to trails or when training either the horse or the rider.

To reduce the risk while riding on roads, workers should:

- avoid busy roads
- only allow horses used to traffic on the road, especially if the rider is inexperienced
- give clear and accurate signals and be considerate of other road users
- avoid riding in failing light or darkness; if this is not possible, reflective riding gear should be worn and leg bands fitted above the horse's fetlock (ankle) joints
- position a calm, experienced horse between the trainee and the traffic when training a horse for safe road riding
- never ride more than two horses abreast on the road
- not ride on the road in foggy conditions
- cross roads in a group if there is more than one rider; if necessary, an experienced rider should dismount and control the road traffic while others cross
- ride at a walking pace as most road surfaces are slippery; do not canter on grass verges
- ensure they have enough information and training to ride safely on roads without putting themselves or others at risk
- be clearly visible to motorists; fluorescent and reflective vests and armbands should be worn, and horses should be provided with leg bands, especially when riding in poor light or low visibility conditions.

Horses being led on foot or from another horse should be on the left-hand side of the road using a lead rope attached to a halter.

Riding alone and in isolation

There can be increased risk to riders in getting help if a rider working alone in a remote area is injured or an incident occurs.

Where riders are working alone or in isolation, there should be processes to ensure:

- another person knows where workers are working
- regular check in procedures have been agreed
- the means of communication has been agreed
- emergency communication systems are in place and working
- an emergency plan is in place
- the level of each worker's experience and training has been assessed and they are competent to undertake tasks alone
- the time it will take to finish the job alone is known and when workers are due to return.

Managing heat stress

The risk of heat stress when riding horses in hot conditions can be managed by taking precautions for both horse and rider, using a combination of:

- maintaining an accessible supply of cool water, encouraging riders to start their shift fully hydrated and keeping well hydrated during their shift, and ensuring horses have frequent access to clean, cool water before, during (where possible) and after work
- managing the rate of work so that the progressive rise in core temperature is kept below levels that might lead to heat illness in both rider and horse
- providing additional rest breaks for riders and horses in cool, shaded areas
- wearing safety approved riding helmets which do not restrict air flow to the head, such as a vented helmet with a wide brim added
- training riders to recognise the symptoms of heat illness in themselves and in horses, and how to treat heat illness with appropriate first aid or veterinary support when needed.

Personal factors

Workers should never ride a horse while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Tasks should be reassessed with alternatives undertaken if the worker is stressed or tired.

Long hair should be tied back so that it does not obscure vision while riding.

Loading and unloading horses for transport

Horses can get stressed when being loaded or unloaded onto trucks and floats. The risk of an incident occurring can be reduced by:

- using anti-slip loading ramps with shallow inclines
- not standing directly under the ramp when lowering or raising it
- making sure the truck or float is safe and suitable for the size of horse
- making sure there is enough lighting to avoid loading problems
- ensuring two people load and unload the horse
- keeping the horse calm, particularly if it has not been transported before
- keeping horses on floats for as short a time possible.

Hygiene around horses

Where practicable, workers should have suitable facilities for hand washing, including running water, soap and a way to dry hands. Buckets or troughs of water that are used by several people are not suitable. Alcohol-based hand sanitiser can be used to help clean hands.

Workers should wash their hands:

- after touching horses, handling horse equipment or removing PPE
- after leaving animal areas
- before eating, drinking and smoking
- following any contamination with a horse's blood and body fluids.

Other considerations for the PCBU include:

- providing eating areas that are away from animal areas; workers should not eat, drink and smoke in animal areas
- keeping stables and yards clean; horse manure and soiled bedding should be removed
- cleaning horse tack and tools regularly, including any equipment that has touched horse blood and body fluids
- providing workers with PPE to protect clothing, exposed skin and face, from contact with a horse's blood and body substances; for example, if examining a horse's wound, disposable gloves should be worn
- ensuring workers using sharps, such as needles and syringes, do so safely and dispose of them carefully in a rigid-walled, puncture-resistant sharps container
- instructing workers to avoid touching areas, such as the muzzle, where horse saliva or snot can be transferred to a worker's face
- instructing workers to cover cuts and scrapes with a water-resistant dressing after properly cleaning the wound; injured workers should be provided with medical advice, particularly if they have a serious or open wound, or have a health condition that increases their chances of infection
- having all horses regularly checked by a veterinarian
- isolating horses that show signs of illness from people and other animals
- instructing workers to keep away from sick horses; sick horses should receive veterinary care
- maintaining a pest control program and keeping feed bins covered to discourage rats and other pests.

Personal protective equipment

There will always be risks around horses, but using the right PPE can reduce the severity of an injury in the event of a fall or other incident.

To prevent exposure to sun damage, SPF 50+ sunscreen should be applied to exposed skin.

Helmets

Suitable protective helmets should meet AS/NZS 3838 *Helmets for horse riding and horse-related activities* or a comparable standard and should be replaced in line with manufacturer's recommendation.

When riding a horse, workers should always wear a correctly fitting helmet where there is a risk of head injury. All novice riders should wear a helmet, and all riders should wear one during higher risk work such as mustering. Best practice is to wear a helmet at all times when riding a horse. To reduce the risk of heat stress, a vented helmet fitted with a wide brim can increase air flow to the head and provide sun protection to the rider.

Helmets that have been dropped or damaged should not be worn as protective qualities may be compromised and should be checked by the manufacturer or other competent person before being used as they may require replacing.

Clothing

Proper clothing that covers the arms and shoulders can help to reduce cuts and grazes in a fall and should be fitted so that it cannot become caught on objects.

While riding, workers should:

- fasten loose clothing so it does not flap or distract the horse or rider
- avoid tight clothing that restricts movement
- avoid wearing jewellery, particularly rings and earrings
- not wear a backpack, or carry loose items that could affect control of the horse
- use reflective clothing if riding at night.

Body protectors

Body or back protectors are padded vests designed to protect the chest and back in the event of a fall or if kicked by the horse. Body protectors should be adjusted to fit securely and reasonably tightly around the upper body.

Gloves

Gloves provide a number of benefits for workers, such as better grip and protection against injury and cold weather.

When riding or handling horses, workers should wear non-slip gloves to stop rope-burn injuries to hands from lead ropes or reins. Reins or ropes should never be held in a loop as this can trap fingers.

Footwear

Wearing proper footwear can help to protect the rider against the weather, provide protection against injury and improve control over the horse.

When riding horses, workers should:

- wear riding boots with a good heel to help stop the foot from slipping through the stirrup
- wear riding boots that protect the feet and ankles; tall boots protect the shins and act as splints for the lower legs in the event of a fall
- wear sturdy footwear as horses can easily crush feet; steel-toe safety boots should be worn while doing ground work around horses
- not wear trainers, sandals or footwear that is too wide or bulky to allow the foot to slip out of the stirrup easily in a fall.

Tack and riding equipment

Tack and riding equipment assists workers in staying safe and in control when riding and should be well-maintained as poorly maintained equipment can contribute to incidents.

Tack and equipment should be:

- checked for flaws and wear every time it is used
- adjusted to fit correctly
- checked to ensure stitching on leather is sound as the thread will wear quicker than leather
- kept clean, supple and well-maintained as horse sweat can rot stitching
- cleaned with saddle soap and oiled or treated regularly to help it last longer and be more comfortable for the horse and rider
- correctly fitted for each horse and suitable for the work being carried out.

Saddles

Saddles provide comfort for the rider and horse and can reduce back pain and other injuries while assisting with balance.

Saddles should be checked regularly to ensure:

- they are safe for use
- they are secure before riding, preferably using a girth strap with two buckles at each end in case one fails
- stitching is not rotten and needs replacing, especially where girth straps are stitched onto webbing that passes over the saddle tree
- girth straps are not stretched or split around the holes; if this happens, they should be replaced. Saddles that have girth straps tacked to the tree should be avoided as they are more likely to fail.

Stirrup leathers

Stirrup leathers can assist the rider's leg stability and provide comfort for the horse and rider. They should be checked thoroughly before use to ensure:

- the thickness of the leather is not too loose, which may allow it to slip out from behind the stirrup bar
- stitching holding the buckle is not broken or decaying and there is no damage around the buckle holes
- the length of the stirrup is not too long for the rider; additional holes should be punched into the leathers rather than wrapping them around the stirrup iron
- stirrup bar safety latches are clean, oiled and operating properly; when riding, safety latches should always be kept in the open or down position, which allows the stirrup leather to pull free from the saddle if the rider falls, reducing the risk of the rider being dragged.

Stirrup irons

Stirrup irons assist riders to control the horse and help to reduce strain by absorbing shock while riding.

Stirrup irons should be:

- made of high-quality material, which is less likely to bend or snap; soft metals, such as brass, are not recommended
- correctly sized for the rider
- able to easily slip off the foot in an emergency, but not be too big so the whole foot can slip through and become trapped
- wide enough so there is a minimum of one centimetre between the boot and stirrup iron on each side.

Novice riders should be provided with safety irons, which use a design or device to release the foot if the rider falls.

Bridles

A well-fitted, ergonomic bridle helps to distribute pressure evenly, which benefits the horse and rider. Bridles should be regularly inspected to check the stitching, buckles and hook studs.