



Health and Safety Bulletin No. 21

Assessing the risks when riding horses

Date: 13 October 2025

Background

There are significant safety risks associated with working with horses. Even the most highly trained horses and riders can have incidents which lead to serious injury or death. For station hands, the risk of falling while riding a horse during stock work is high. Head injuries are by far the leading cause of death in horse-related incidents.

In addition to the risk of falls when riding a horse, there are also risks associated with being kicked or bitten during other work with horses. You can also catch some diseases from horses, such as ringworm, leptospirosis, psittacosis or salmonellosis.

Contributory factors

The main factors that affect the likelihood of sustaining a head injury when a rider falls from a horse are fall height, speed of the horse and the terrain. The more an individual rides a horse, the more experienced they become and the more familiar they are with that horse. However, the more often a worker rides or handles horses, the greater chance there is for a fall or injury to occur.

The most important contributory factors to consider are:

Rider

Inexperienced riders may not have sufficient knowledge, skills and experience with riding or handling horses. New riders may not have fully developed skills and may lack the strength required to control a horse for riding or handling tasks. However, experience does not necessarily mean that a person is at less risk. Riders who have been around horses for years may still be using unsafe techniques, or become complacent due to their familiarity with horses.

Horse

Horses have different characteristics and may act unpredictably. The extent the rider has control of the horse can change quickly. For example, even the quietest horse may become dangerous if it is frightened. Factors such as temperament, training, age, movement, sex, size, breed and current health need to be considered when matching horse and rider.

Environment

A key element in horse-rider interaction is the environment. This includes the setting where the horse is used as well as the physical location and terrain, weather conditions and the degree of visibility for both the horse and rider.

Uneven terrain with rocks, holes, fallen timber, gullies and bore drains may lead to injuries

from incidents involving horses tripping. Any activity which involves speed, such as fast stock work, results in greater risk.

Distraction, other animals, unfamiliar or loud noises, a change in routine or livestock acting unpredictably during mustering also increase the likelihood of a fall.

Actions required

The person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) should ensure a competent person undertakes a risk assessment before workers or other persons, such as clients or visitors, are required to ride or handle horses. This should preferably be recorded.

Before allowing a horse to be ridden or handled the PCBU should be confident that the horse is suitable for the rider and satisfied that all issues identified in the assessment have been addressed. Workers should be consulted during the risk assessment and when selecting controls.

Assess the risk

A risk assessment should include:

- a rider's confidence, skills and ability
- horse health, reliability and predictability
- environmental conditions, including weather, terrain and remoteness
- work activity, e.g. mustering, stock inspection, riding lessons.

Control the risks

Suitable controls should include:

- having a competent person assess riders to ensure that they are matched with a horse that is suitable for their riding ability
- ensuring provision of adequate information, training, instruction and supervision
- ensuring safe procedures are followed for working with horses
- ensuring stables and yards are well designed and maintained
- ensuring riding equipment fits the horse and is well maintained
- providing facilities for washing up after handling horses
- limiting access to stables and yards.

Using personal protective equipment

Suitable personal protective equipment should be used wherever there is a risk to health and safety that cannot be adequately controlled by other means. This includes the provision of suitable footwear such as riding boots, riding gloves, correctly adjusted and fitted helmet and long trousers.

The most important piece of equipment while riding is a helmet which complies with the Australian Standard AS/NZS 3838 *Helmets for horse riding and horse related activities*. These helmets afford the greatest protection in the event of a fall and should be used where there is a risk of a head injury. New and inexperienced riders should always wear an approved helmet. All riders should wear an approved helmet when undertaking higher risk activities, such as mustering.

Helmets need to be properly fitted and strapped on securely to be effective. This means that they must not be able to slip forward, backward or wobble when worn. Helmets should be

less than five years old (check the helmet manufacture date on the Australian Standards label inside the helmet).

Have a competent person check any helmet that may have damage, and discard any helmet involved in a heavy impact.

Managing heat stress

Within the agricultural sector, a wide-brimmed hat is often chosen instead of a riding helmet. However, there are riding helmets that are suitable for use in hot environments. PCBU's should provide helmets that are comfortable and have ventilation. A selection of helmet brims are commercially available and these provide additional sun protection.

The risk of heat stress when riding horses in hot conditions can be managed with a combination of:

- planning to do the work at cooler times of the day
- maintaining an accessible supply of cool water, encouraging riders to start their shift fully hydrated and keeping well hydrated during their shift
- allowing workers to manage the pace of work
- providing additional rest breaks for riders in cool, shaded areas
- wearing riding helmets which do not restrict air flow to the head, such as a vented helmet with a wide brim
- training riders to recognise the symptoms of heat illness and how to treat heat illness with appropriate first aid.

Following safe riding practices

Safe riding practices should include:

- adjusting equipment from the ground
- mounting in a safe, preferably enclosed area without obstructions
- riding in good light, avoiding twilight and darkness
- avoiding riding on busy roads
- if riding in a group, placing experienced riders at the front and rear of the group
- considering whether the riding environment is still safe as slippery or boggy conditions present additional risks
- not riding in or through floodwaters.

Recommendations

Always conduct a risk assessment before allowing a horse to be ridden in the workplace.

Ensure adequate instruction and training is provided to all riders irrespective of experience.

Riding helmets should be used where there is a risk of head injury. New and inexperienced riders should always wear an approved riding helmet. All riders should wear an approved helmet when undertaking higher risk activities, such as mustering.

References and further information

Department of Local Government, Industry Regulation and Safety

WorkSafe Western Australia

- [Working with horses on farms: Checklist](#)
- [Horses on farms: Information sheet](#)

Work Health and Safety Commission

- [How to manage work health and safety risks: Code of practice](#)

Standards Australia

- AS/NZS 3838:2006 *Helmets for horse riding and horse-related activities*

Farmsafe Australia

- [Working with horses: A practical guide](#)

Meat and Livestock Australia Ltd

- [The impact of protective helmets on physiological strain and cognitive function during horseback mustering: Final report](#)

Safe Work Australia

- [Guide to managing risks in cattle handling](#)
- [Guide to managing risks when new and inexperienced persons interact with horses](#)

Safe Work NSW

- [Working with horses safety alert](#)

WorkSafe Queensland

- [Horse handling fatality: safety alert](#)
- [Horse handling](#)

WorkSafe Victoria

- [Safe cattle handling: Mustering](#)

Note: This Health and Safety Bulletin has been reissued and replaces WorkSafe Safety alert 6/2020.ss