Basic First-Aid for the Horse---What to do before the vet arrives.....

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One of the most stressful situations for a horse owner to be in is waiting for a veterinarian during an equine emergency. With some preparation and basic first-aid knowledge, the time spent waiting for a vet can be effectively utilized to assess the horse’s condition and limit any further harm and discomfort to the horse. A few of the common emergencies a horse owner may find themselves in include a horse with colic (abdominal pain), bleeding laceration, swollen eye, puncture wound, recumbent horse unable to rise, foaling difficulty, and a horse unable to walk on a leg. It is important to remember that an equine emergency can be a dangerous situation, and the safety of all people present should be the first priority.

An equine first-aid kit, of varying sizes, should be accessible during all equine situations, including trailering, trail rides, foaling, shows, and at home. The first-aid kit should be kept in a container that can keep out dust and water, such as a tool box or plastic box with lid. Some basic instruments in the kit should include bandage scissors, stethoscope, and thermometer. Supplies for bandaging should include vet wrap, bandage material, non-stick Telfa pads, and duct tape. An antiseptic scrub such as betadine or nolvasan can be used to clean a laceration or puncture, as well as a medicated ointment to coat a wound under a bandage. Depending on the level of experience with administering medications, a first-aid kit may also contain an injectable sedative such as xylazine and an anti-inflammatory injectable such as flunixin meglumine (Banamine).

While waiting for a veterinarian, a horse owner can access the horse’s condition and provide valuable information once the vet arrives. In certain medical emergencies such as colic, profuse diarrhea, inability to rise, and a young foal not nursing, a basic Temp-Pulse-Respiration and assessment of the horse’s attitude can be used to inform the veterinarian of the severity of the emergency. A horse with colic symptoms, curling upper lip, pawing, rolling, needs to be evaluated by a veterinarian. Once it has been determined a horse is showing signs of colic, all grain and hay should be removed from the stall. It can be helpful to walk a horse that has abdominal
pain in order to keep them from rolling and increasing the severity of their condition. A horse with colic can be dangerous and people should stay clear if the horse’s pain cannot be controlled.

An important skill for horse owners to be able to perform is a proper leg or hoof bandage. When the proper care is given to a wound prior to the veterinarian’s arrival, the chances of a successful outcome are increased. If a horse has a puncture wound or laceration, it is important to clean the wound and prevent further contamination before the vet can attend to the horse. Often times a gentle cleaning with an antiseptic scrub and rinsing with water from a hose can be helpful steps for the horse owner to perform. Once a wound is clean a simple bandage can ensure the area stays clean before it can assessed by a vet.