

# FACT SHEET

## Guidance on the Safe Handling and Restraint of Horses

PAGE 1



Due to their size, strength and unpredictable nature, proper restraint of horses is vital for their own safety and that of people working with them. It is a little known fact that more people are injured whilst standing next to horses than are injured by falling off them.

Many horses will behave uncharacteristically when undergoing veterinary treatment. Some procedures cause discomfort, while others require a vet to stand in a dangerous place such as directly behind the horse.

Whilst working with your horse, veterinary surgeons assume responsibility for the safety of the horse and the people present. For this reason, we will sometimes ask for individuals (especially young children), dogs or other horses to be removed from the area.

### Head collar, Bridles and Chiffneys

An appropriately fitting head collar, with a secure lead rope attached, is appropriate for the majority of examinations.

Care should be taken not to hold onto the head collar, as fingers can easily become trapped and damaged when dealing with difficult horses. Additional control can be obtained by looping the lead rope over the nose and back through the head collar.

A bridle is often useful when dealing with nervous horses and especially when trotting up excitable animals, particularly stallions. A bridle cannot be used when examining teeth.

A Chifney bit attached to a headpiece can also be used with head collar to stop rearing and provide better restraint.

### Holding up a Front Leg

This can be very useful when examining hind legs to minimize the risk of kicking. Care must be taken not to get kicked or stepped on if the horse starts to move. This method is often useful when a horse needs to bear weight on a sore leg, such as to place a bandage. Care must be taken, however, with horses that are able to balance on two legs!

### Stocks

Stocks are extremely useful but are only available at clinics and breeding facilities. They increase the safety of rectal examinations and stud work, as well as procedures around the head and legs.

We have two sets of purpose designed and built stocks at the practice. Some owners are concerned that their horse might panic in the stocks, but this rarely the case and the majority of horses stand quietly in the stocks



# FACT SHEET

## Guidance on the Safe Handling and Restraint of Horses

PAGE 2

### Twitches

Twitches have long been used to calm horses and provide restraint for pulling manes and tails, clipping, sheath cleaning, and minor veterinary procedures. Although their exact mechanism of action is unknown, it is widely believed that the pinching of a horse's skin results in the release of endorphins that have a sedative action. Several types of twitch are commonly used:

**Neck Twitch** - this is applied by grabbing a handful of loose skin on the neck (below left), which can be easily tightened or released. It is usually performed by the person holding the horse's head. It will often distract a horse long enough to give an injection, examine a wound or perform an ultrasound examination.

**Nose Twitch** - in sensitive, knowledgeable hands this can be extremely useful, particularly in situations where the head must be kept still. It will often enable difficult and painful procedures to be performed without the need for chemical sedation.

The rope loop on a twitch should be large enough to fit over the hand, for ease of application (above right). It should always be made of soft cord to avoid trauma to the upper lip and gums. Window cord is ideal.

A twitch should be made specifically for the purpose (not some baler twine on a pitch fork!) and design can make a big difference to its usefulness. The loop needs to be placed at the end of the handle, threaded through a hole drilled into the handle (below left) and out through holes drilled in the side (below right).

The handle should be long enough to allow a two-handed grip, or to allow the lead rope to be attached leaving a hand free to comfort the horse (below left).

So-called humane twitches are available in saddlers and tack shops. These typically consist of a pair of hinged tubes that are tightened over the horse's nose (above right).

It is a fallacy that these are any more humane than a properly made cord loop twitch and are prone to slipping off at the most inconvenient of times.



### Chemical Restraint

Sometimes procedures are too painful or scary for horses to tolerate without some degree of chemical sedation. In some instances, an oral sedative such as Sedalin Gel will provide enough relaxation. This is often helpful in horses that are nervous at clipping or shoeing time, or in horses that are to be turned out after a prolonged period of box rest.

Injectable sedatives are extremely useful when working with particularly nervous or difficult horses, or when performing more complicated treatments and minor surgery. We will usually give a combination of two drugs, such as Domosedan or Sedivet with Torbugesic by intravenous injection, to sedate horses and provide pain relief.

The degree of sedation achieved depends upon the dose of drugs used and the horse's temperament. Sedated horses may be unsteady on their feet for a period of time but rarely lay down. The sedation usually wears off after 30-45 minutes.

Food should be withheld from sedated horses for 2 hours, since this allows time for full digestive function to return and minimizes the risk of colic.

### ...and finally

Horses are by their nature unpredictable and occasionally dangerous, and therefore there is always risk associated with any procedure. However by adopting safe handling and restraint techniques we can reduce the risks. Please do not hesitate to contact the practice if you have any further questions.

