Capture and Restraint of Horses

When working with equine patients it is important to not only know how to properly capture, perform restraint, and distraction techniques for these animals, but also to understand the potential dangers and practice proper technique when approaching a horse.

Potential Dangers

The rear feet of an adult horse can have a kicking range of up to 8 feet. To pass by a horse safely the technician should stay at least 10 to 12 feet behind or to the side of the animal. Alternatively, the technician can stay in physical contact with the horse. If a horse rears it can use its front feet to knock a person down. The front feet can also be used to strike out without rearing up.

Approaching a Horse

Horses are trained to be approached from the near or left side. The right side is termed the far side. When approaching the horse, the technician should move slowly and talk softly without sudden movements or loud noises. If the horse moves away, stop, or the horse may think it is being chased and flee.

Capturing a Horse

Slip the lead rope around the horse’s neck and tie a single overhand knot to prevent the rope from slipping off. To place the halter, hold the neck strap of the halter in the left hand, reach under the horse’s neck, and hold the head still so the right hand can bring the halter over the horse’s neck. Slide the nose band of the halter onto the nose and buckle the neck strap behind the ears. Check to be sure the halter is sitting on the horse’s face correctly. Attach the lead rope to the center ring of the halter under the chin. Untie the lead rope from around the neck. The left hand should hold the loose end of the rope in neat loops with the entire rope held in front of you.

* Never wrap the loose end of the lead rope tightly around your hand or any part of your body.
* Never have the rope loose behind you.

Leading a Horse

Gather the lead rope in your left hand. Always walk on the near side of the horse with your right hand on the lead rope approximately 5 to 6 inches below the halter ring. Stay close to the shoulder and when stopping, stand facing the same direction as the horse.

Restraint for General Examinations

Stand on the same side of the horse as the person who is working on the animal. By standing on the same side, the horse has an opportunity to move away from both of you. If there are barriers on both sides the horse may decide to move over a smaller object. This could mean moving over someone bending or kneeling, causing serious injury.

When tying a horse, it should always be tied to a sturdy, vertical object. The knot used to tie the lead rope should always be a quick release knot so the horse can be freed quickly if there is an emergency. Allow 2 to 3 feet of lead rope so the horse can move its head comfortably. The lead rope should not be any longer than 2 to 3 feet or the horse may get its front feet tangled. If the rope is left shorter it may frustrate the horse and cause it to try to escape. Check the area for hazards that could injure the horse. Never pass under the neck of a tied horse; this can result in serious injuries.
Equine Restraint

Cross tying is used to prevent a horse from rearing and from moving its forequarters from side to side. It should be noted however, that the horse can still strike with its front feet and move its hindquarters. Snap a lead rope onto the cheek piece ring on each side of the halter. Tie each lead rope to the side of the stanchion, to stocks, or beams. Cross tying will allow you access to the entire body but does not prevent the rear from swinging.

Stocks are narrow stalls with removable or semi open sides and a gate at both ends. To place the horse in the stocks you should lead the animal through the back gate and close the front after it is all of the way in. Never go into the stocks with the horse, instead, pass the rope around the bars as needed to keep the horse moving forward. Stocks are usually used for rectal and uterine examinations or procedures on the head.

Blindfolds can be used to control a stubborn or a fearful horse. The horse will normally calm down and allow you to lead it wherever you want it to go. Work slowly and talk constantly to reassure the horse.

Hobbles are rarely used since being replaced by chemical restraint. However, breeding hobbles are still used commonly and effectively prevent the mare from kicking. They are fitted around the hocks with web or leather straps and then tied to a neck strap or rope after being passed between the forelegs.

Restraint for Dental Procedures
Place your left hand on the bridge of the horse’s nose with your thumb under the noseband of the halter, and place your right hand on the nape of the neck; pushing the head down. To hold the tongue, reach in at the commissure of the lips, grasp the tongue, and slowly pull it out to the side through the diastema of the lower jaw.

Distraction Techniques
Twitches are used on stubborn horses that will not allow procedures to be performed. Twitches distract the horse from other procedures by applying a mild pain to the upper muzzle. The chain, humane, and rope are the three types of twitches. Of these three, the chain is the most commonly used. To apply the twitch, place the loop of chain over your left hand catching one side of the loop between your little finger and ring finger. Grasp as much of the horse’s upper lip with your left hand as possible, pressing the bottom edges together to protect the delicate inner surface, and quickly slide the handle up so the chain loop rests high up around the lip. Tighten the chain by twisting the handle until the twitch is fitted snugly on the lip so that it curls upward. Tighten and loosen the chain on the muzzle to keep the twitch effective. If steady pressure is applied, the muzzle would lose circulation, reducing sensitivity of the muzzle, making the twitch ineffective. After the twitch is removed, massage the muzzle to restore circulation.

The eyelid press is a distraction technique involving placement of the fingers on the upper eyelids and lightly applying pressure. This is a gentle technique that can be used when giving injections or to keep the horse still.

The shoulder roll is done by grasping a large fold of skin just over the shoulder with both hands and wiggling it from side to side or up and down. This technique works well when giving intravenous injections.

Heavy swats or grasping the base of the ear with the heel of your hand touching the head and squeezing or rotating the ear in a small circle are both alternative and effective ways to distract a horse.
Picking up the Feet
For the front feet stand lateral to the shoulder and parallel to the horse, facing the caudal end of the animal. Place your closest hand on the horse’s shoulder; gently but firmly run it down to the fetlock. Grasp the fetlock by placing your palm on the underside of the fetlock and wrapping your fingers around the joint. Squeeze and lift the foot; at the same time lean into the horse to make it shift its weight to the other three legs. After raising the foot up, bring it slightly out to the side. Place your body close to the animal’s body so that your knees are slightly bent. Place the foot between your knees. This allows both of your hands to be free. Flex the fetlock and hoof towards yourself. For the rear feet approach in the same manner as for the front feet. After you have lifted the food, extend the leg out to the rear and place it on top of your bent knee closest to the horse.

Capture and Restraint of a Foal
Keep the foal in sight of the mare. Place the mother in a stall so she can see the foal but is unable to get to you. Grasp the foal around the front of the chest with one arm, and around the rump with the other arm, or grasp the tail. Quickly move the foal clear of the mare. Use your arms to form a “mini corral” to keep the foal within the circle of your arms. Lifting the foal off its feet will make it nervous and cause it to struggle. Always talk to a foal and comfort it.

References