

*Horse Care*

The Cast Horse— Reasons And Rescue

by HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Sometimes a horse gets himself into a situation where he can't get up, and becomes "cast." He may roll in his stall and find himself on his back against the wall, or against a paddock fence and get his feet stuck in the rails or net wire. He may roll too close to a ditch and end up on his back in the ditch. Some horses lie quietly when cast, waiting for help, but most will panic and struggle, injuring their legs in the fence or beating their heads on the stall floor or the ground in frenzied attempts to get up.

"Oftentimes when a horse becomes cast, it's just bad luck," says Tia Nelson, DVM (a farrier/veterinarian in Helena, Montana). "The horse lies down for a nap, and then decides to roll before getting up, and gets into a spot where he can't get back up."

Risk Of Injury

During his struggles, a cast horse may scrape himself, break bones, cut his legs in a fence if he is caught in it or under it, or damage an eye while beating his head. If he is down and frantic for any length of time, he may twist an intestine during these exertions, or become totally exhausted.

If caught on his back for a long time he may suffocate, due to the pressure of abdominal organs and digestive tract

against his lungs, decreasing his lung capacity. A pregnant mare, heavy with foal, may find it more difficult to get off her back if she lies down or rolls and finds herself with her back slightly downhill.

Some horses get into trouble often, rolling against the stall wall or fence. Horses in stalls should be checked frequently. Some are careful about where they lie down and won't try to roll in a stall, but others are more careless or just can't resist a good back-scratching roll. Even a horse in a pen or paddock can get into trouble if his favorite lying down spot is next to the fence.

Whenever horses are in stalls or small pens, chances of having a horse cast increase, even if an individual doesn't normally roll in his stall or next to a fence. A horse with colic pain may roll, oblivious to the stall wall or fence until he gets caught up against it. The foaling mare is another candidate, says Nelson. Thudding sound of hoofs against the wall or grunting noises coming from the paddock or horses whinnying because their buddy is in distress, can signal the need for an emergency rescue.

Rescue

It's relatively easy for two or more people to roll a

Reasons For Rolling

A horse who habitually gets into trouble in his stall or paddock may have an underlying health reason for wanting to roll so much, and this type of problem will need correction. "If a client has a horse who routinely casts itself, I will start looking for neurologic dysfunction or a lameness that might be making the horse want to lie down more than he ought to. If it's a neurologic dysfunction, you'll look for things like a brain tumor, concussion, narcolepsy, seizures, an infectious disease, electrolyte imbalance, or if the horse is a wobbler," says Nelson. There may be some mechanical reason why the horse is down a lot and gets into trouble.

"There are all sorts of things that can cause problems in the brain besides a tumor. It may be as simple as being hypoglycemic (which you don't see very often in horses, but it can occur). You'd want to rule out endocrine problems and other possibilities." The history of the horse can help the veterinarian decide whether further evaluation of the horse is needed. Is this the first time the horse has been cast, or has he done it a number of times? If a horse is making a hobby out of casting itself, a thorough exam is in order, to arrive at the reason, says Nelson.

Skin problems that create itching may make him a compulsive roller. A horse may become very itchy when shed-

ding winter hair, or might have a problem like lice, mites or ticks. "I went to see an older horse the other day because the owner said it had black lumps on its neck—which turned out to be engorged ticks. In one small area two by three inches square, I pulled off 16 ticks. This horse was crawling with ticks, and he was very itchy!" says Nelson.

"Food allergies or contact allergies that cause hives can also make a horse itch and want to roll. Some horses are allergic to something in their hay or bedding and can become very itchy." Nettles, insect bites and other problems can make a horse so itchy that he becomes oblivious to his boundaries. When a horse is scratching himself rolling, he is not necessarily paying attention to what he might be rolling into, she says.

Regular bouts of mild colic may also be a possibility, but in her experience, the most common cause of a horse getting cast is the pregnant mare, down foaling. Severe colic pain or labor pains will put the horse on the ground, sometimes thrashing to try to get away from the pain. "These are probably the most dangerous ones to sort out. If a horse is down and in that much pain, it's best to stay out of his way," she says. Trying to help the horse get up may put you at risk to be severely injured by flailing feet.

horse away from a wall or fence, but one person can accomplish this task if necessary. If the horse is a little distance from the wall, he may just need to be pulled a few inches more in order to get enough room to get his feet back down to the ground so he can scramble up. A rope around his neck may give you enough leverage to pull his head and neck (and thus his front end) those few crucial inches.

If the horse is close to the wall, however, he will have to be rolled over. This can be done by pulling on the front legs (which are up in the air), especially the leg nearest the wall. Since the horse may be thrashing violently and flailing those legs, it's always better to use a rope around a front pastern than to try to hold onto a leg with your hands. The rope allows you to be a little out of the way—out of reach of those flying feet.

"Pay attention, and stay calm. I usually try to loop a rope over a leg and either bring a leg forward, or get a rope over the two down legs and roll the horse—and that can be dangerous if you aren't careful," says Nelson.

"Never, ever hang onto the leg itself, if you can possibly avoid it. What I usually recommend is to get a loop of rope around the limb, rather than tie it, because usually all you have to do is give the horse a bit of help rolling over. You don't want a tied rope dangling off the leg (you want it to come loose easily), and you want to be able to jump out of his way as soon as he rolls over. The horse needs only a little leverage to get himself over and often needs

just a tiny bit of room. He may only need a little help. Horses are very strong and athletic and very good at taking care of themselves, she says.

Brace a foot high on his neck just behind his head and push his head toward the stall wall as you pull his foreleg toward you and tip his weight toward the center of the stall. As soon as he starts to come your way, get out of his way. Move quickly past his head and away from those thrashing legs; he's going to lunge to his feet as soon as he rolls away from the wall or fence.

"Safety first, is my recommendation. Pay attention to exactly where you are. One thing that always surprises me is how far a horse can reach with his leg when he's flailing. I've had my shins knocked when holding a horse's head down for some procedure; it's easy to underestimate how far the radius of that hind leg reach can be," she says. A frantic horse is not paying attention to you and can hurt you unintentionally in his struggles. Nelson stresses the importance of being extremely careful when handling the cast horse. If you get hurt, you can't help the horse.

Once he is back on his feet and calm, check him over for any possible injury such as dirt or bedding chaff in his eyes, scrapes on his legs or body, or other damage. If he is in a stall, halter him and take him out and walk him a little to see if he is lame from his struggles. Observe him carefully for awhile—for any signs of colic—in case this was the reason he was rolling. 🐾

Preventing The Problem

If a horse is a frequent roller, you may have to make changes in his stall or pen to keep him from getting cast so often. You can put rubber tires along the side of a paddock where a horse habitually rolls, for instance, forcing him to do his rolling farther away from the fence. If a paddock is a sea of mud during wet weather, a horse may lie too close to the fence if that's the only dry spot. To prevent this problem, you can make a built-up area in the middle of the paddock by hauling in crushed rock and putting a layer of sand and dirt on top of it; you can create a mounded area during the dry season when you can get into the paddock with a truck. This can make a place that will stay drier—so horses will lie on it instead of next to the fence.

To avoid possible injuries in the paddock, it helps to have small-mesh netting on fences. You don't want the horse to put a foot through poles, boards or large diameter netting. A horse can sometimes push off against the netting—as he might against a solid wall—rather than getting his feet caught in the fence, and be able to get up without help. Small-mesh netting over gates can keep a horse from getting a foot between the bars or rails. "Wooden corrals are not necessarily safe for a horse who rolls or gets his feet under the fence. I once watched a horse break a leg getting his feet through. If a down horse gets his feet through the rails and then decides to stand

up—and the angle is just wrong—he can break a leg," says Nelson.

In the barn, an intercom from barn to house may help you hear if a horse is thrashing in his stall during the night. For some horses, a larger stall, or extra bedding around the edges to discourage lying close to the wall, may solve the problem. For a persistent roller, a slanting false wall at the bottom of the stall can keep the horse out of the trap created by the angle of the wall and floor. A slanting baseboard that covers the bottom two feet of stall wall and comes out two feet from the wall can be put against the side of the stall where the horse habitually becomes cast. With the slanting baseboard he can no longer get his withers stuck in the corner between floor and wall—and will tend to slide back down onto his side if he happens to roll against the baseboard.

If all else fails, you can use an anti-cast roller on a horse who insists on rolling into the wall or fence. This fits around the girth, with a metal hoop firmly attached to the top part that goes over the withers. The hoop keeps the horse from going clear over if he rolls; he can only roll on one side at a time. Thus he cannot roll on over and get himself stuck against the wall. Some saddlery companies used to sell these rollers, but a functional version can be made by mounting a metal hoop onto the top part of the bellyband portion of a driving harness.