

How Safe Is Your Barn?

Do-It-Yourself Barn Safety Assessment

By Polly Haselton Barger

Now that winter is coming to a close and our thoughts are turning to the joys of horse ownership, it is a good time to take a look around your barn and make sure things are as safe for you and your horses as possible.

Take a walk through your barn with a critical eye for safety, and envision improvements that need to be made. Then make them!

Start with the feed storage area. Are all grains stored in a dry place that is totally inaccessible to rodents? If there are rodent droppings, they should be removed and the whole area disinfected (wear a mask if you are sweeping up droppings). Check for openings that mice, rats, raccoons or opossums can get through. Cover any such openings with hardware cloth to keep them out.

If mold is a problem in your barn, consider placing your feed containers up on a pallet so the air can circulate around them. Get in the habit of sweeping up spilled grain to eliminate attracting pests.

Make certain that your grain is stored behind an absolutely horse-proof latch and if other people have access to the area, consider a lock. Not everyone understands the importance of controlling your horse's intake! Be sure to post a detailed feed chart for each horse in case someone else needs to feed for you.

If you store hay in a loft make sure the ladder or stairs are in good repair. Check for nails that are sticking out and make sure all haystring is contained. If small children have access to your loft, you might consider a railing of some kind. Check that the area is dry and well-ventilated, and no leaks have developed over the winter. If at all possible, store your hay and bedding in a separate structure if you overnight your horses in the barn.

Be sure to have functioning fire extinguishers in all structures and know how to use them!

Evaluate your horses' water source for various hazards. If you have a metal trough, check for sharp or rusty spots horses could cut themselves on, and if it is heated check all wiring for worn places.

Wherever you keep your equine medical supplies, be sure they are properly stored and locked up--totally inaccessible to neighbors, friends and children. If you give injections of any kind you should have a container for safe disposal of contaminated needles. A clearly marked plastic milk jug will do.

This is a good time to inventory your first aid and medical supplies. Be sure you have the very basics on hand: latex gloves, wound cleanser and antibacterial ointment, Epsom salts, etc. It is important to have bandages and leg wraps on hand. Disposable diapers and sanitary pads are incredibly useful as bandages. It is a good idea to have a thermometer and stethoscope and know how to use them.

All barns, whether large or small, need to post certain signs. Check with your attorney and insurance agent about what your specific responsibilities and liabilities might be. In many states, an Equine Liability law sign must be prominently posted. Certainly you should consider a prominent "No Smoking" sign, and a "Keep Out" sign.

Check your tack room next. Are there piles of junk and broken tack in the corners? Is the tack stored neatly and off of the damp floor? Don't compromise the integrity of your equipment by letting it hang crooked.

Are your blankets and pads filthy from the winter muds? This is a good time to do a complete tack check and thorough cleaning.

If your helmet is stored in your tack room, inspect it carefully now. Is it ASTM-SEI approved? Is there any evidence of damage (dents, scrapes or cracks)? Is the harness in good shape? Most helmet companies recommend replacing your helmet every five years, so check the date. Most companies will also inspect your helmet at no cost if it has sustained a blow.

If your barn has a hallway, be sure it is clear of obstacles. Could you lead a panicked horse through it in the dark during an emergency? Many people store stall cleaning equipment (pitch forks, rakes, wheelbarrows, etc.) in this area, but all equipment should be well secured and out of reach of loose horses. If you have cross ties in your aisles be sure you never leave a horse in them unattended and also be sure that the quick release system is intact.

Next, check the stalls. Are they large enough for the amount of time your horses spend in them? Are they clean, dry and free of dust and cobwebs? Have your horses dug uneven places in them? Are there protruding nails or large wood splinters?

Are the latches secure and free of sharp places? Are the feeders and waterers clean and free of sharp protrusions? Are there any ropes or wires in which a horse could catch himself? Does the door open wide enough for the horse and person leading it to get in and out safely?

Most people who own horses have small containment pens or paddocks, as well as larger fields or pastures. One big safety issue is fencing. Safety in fencing is influenced by the density of the horses in the enclosure, as well as the materials used. For instance, in smaller pens with several horses, an individual horse is more likely to be chased or knocked into the fence, so there is a great need for fencing that is safe and secure, such as rail or webbing. In a larger pasture, horses are less likely to push each other into the fence, so it is more acceptable to use wire fencing.

Another issue in both pens and pastures is the presence of objects on which a horse could hurt himself. Did large branches or trees fall down during the winter? Did you tend to pile brush and debris in your horse area? Are there tractors or other equipment accessible to the horses?

Is your trailer parked where the horses can get to it? Once again, these are more of a problem in areas with high density of horses like small pens, but it is my experience that a horse will hurt himself if there is anything around to do it on. After all, he has no self-preservation instinct that defines an old truck as dangerous. Remember, an injured horse is potentially a dangerous horse, so consider fencing off all vehicles, trailers, tractors, etc., so your horse cannot hurt himself.

Speaking of horse trailers, be sure to include yours in your springtime safety check. Is the hitch in good shape? Pull up the mats--are the floors in good shape? Have the walls or partitions developed rusty spots? Are there sharp places on the edges? Does the quick-release mechanism on the trailer ties still work? Are there sharp edges where the horse steps on and off? Do the lights all work? Are the tires in good shape? Are the safety chains intact?

Spring is the time to initiate your fly control program. Horses that are aggravated by flies are not only at greater risk for disease, but also can be more difficult to handle.

With the advent of cell phones most people have emergency communication at their barns. Make sure you have updated emergency phone numbers posted prominently--including EMS, fire, vet, farrier and emergency contacts. Be sure to have clear directions to your barn posted with the numbers.

Have your human first aid kit clearly displayed and marked. If you trail ride you also want to have a saddlebag kit stocked and ready to pick up and go. Be sure it also includes a list of updated emergency phone numbers. This is a good time to check and restock these first aid kits.

Hopefully, using this do-it-yourself barn safety assessment will help to make your own horse environment a safer, more pleasant place for you and your horses!

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