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# HAUL SAFE & HEALTHY

## A veterinarian shares the latest thinking on keeping horses healthy when trailering

BY STACIE G. BOSWELL, DVM, DACVS

**H**Health consequences of trailering your horse can range from mild to extreme. A research group in Australia in 2016 identified the most common problems in trailering. Of the horses with problems, traumatic injuries (45%), gastrointestinal problems (including diarrhea and colic, 30%), muscular problems (13%), respiratory problems (12%), and overheating (10%) occurred. When the numbers are added up, it is clear that some horses had more than one problem.

Behaviorally, the horse is stressed during trailering because his main defense – flight – has been completely taken from him. This stress may weaken his immune system at the same time he is exposed to new horses and the viruses they may be carrying. Here are some suggestions for traveling with safety and good health.

### Trailer inspections

Loose or weak floor boards, a malfunctioning braking system, or a tire blowout can result in a disaster while shipping horses. Before every trip, the trailer coupler should be triple-checked that it is properly engaged, that the lights and brakes are plugged in, and that the emergency brake battery is charged and connected properly. The truck and trailer ball or coupling should be properly size matched. An annual trailer inspection should include evaluating the floor, the wheel bearings (and packing if needed), the brakes and emergency brake box, and all hardware and latches. Unexpected mechanical issues can occur, but regular inspection and caution will prevent many problems.

## Driver safety

The driver should be confident with the truck and trailer in their charge. Practice, practice, practice with an empty trailer. If possible, a backup plan should be in place with a secondary driver in case the primary driver is injured or becomes ill. A smooth, confident ride will prevent the horses from the slipping and falling that can happen on an erratic ride.

Drivers should be well rested and alert; driving drowsy is just not worth the risk! This goes without saying, but drivers absolutely should not use cell phones while shipping horses. At least pull over to use the phone or have a passenger assist with necessary calls or navigation.

## Horses have preferences

Understanding the individual horses in the trailer is helpful. If the two chestnut mares don't get along, trailering them next to each other should be avoided if possible. Does one horse prefer to go into the trailer last and come off first? Does one drink just fine on the road, but the other needs coaxing? If someone else is shipping your horses, the shipper should be able to identify each horse in his or her care. In case of emergency, it is important that horses have identification on them. Examples include a leather neck collar with a name and phone number, or an ID band with contact information affixed to the halter.

## Halter and tie horses properly

The halter and tie chosen is very important. A breakaway halter or tie is an absolute necessity at all times in the trailer. Do not let horses stick their heads out of windows while the vehicle is moving!

With few exceptions (e.g. horses that fight with their neighbors), the horse should be tied so that he can get his head down below the point of his shoulder to cough. This helps clear the airway and is of extreme importance – especially if traveling more than four hours. Clearing the airway is the primary way to prevent pneumonia.

The rope halter is worth a particular notation here. Many people enjoy the use of these halters, as they are convenient for many sizes of horses, don't break easily, and help control the horse more efficiently than a flat halter. The thinner rope has more "feel" and helps achieve the desired response from the horse as the handler applies a more concentrated pressure.

Think about it this way: the smaller point of a pencil will get more response than the flat end with an eraser with the same amount of pressure. But horses should NOT be trailered in a rope halter. If the horse is riding in the trailer and balances himself by partially leaning on the halter, it is unfair to have the extra "bite" of the thin rope punishing him! Additionally, the halter/rope non-breakable combination is not appropriate for trailer travel.

## Dress horses properly

Shipping boots or leg wraps or nothing? What about sheets and blankets? The trailer quickly becomes much warmer (20 degrees or more!) than the outside and horses can rapidly overheat. However, livestock trailers or those with a design open to the wind justify a blanket for a windbreak in colder weather. Horses in enclosed trailers generally do not need blankets as they are more likely to sweat. Sweating leads to dehydration and loss of electrolytes. Those losses are the primary contributing factors to colic associated with travel.

Leg wraps can contribute to overheating. If not applied properly, the wraps or shipping boots themselves can contribute to injury. If a horse is not accustomed to wearing the wraps, he may become agitated and kick or stomp. This can result in trailer damage, injury to the horse, and injury to other horses. Open trailer? The horse should wear a fly mask to prevent particles from injuring his eyes or face. Any gear a horse is wearing should be in good repair.

## Air quality is key

Traveling with vents open is important for controlling both air quality and temperature. Fresh air flow is critical to reduce ammonia inside the trailer. Ammonia build-up from urine results in damage to the cells that line the respiratory tract, thus increasing the risk of pneumonia.

Shavings on the floor are not a good idea, especially in open trailers – the dust and particles harm the respiratory tract. On the subject of particles, if a hay bag is hung, wetting it down will drastically reduce the dust that it will emit.

## Travel time

Although a recent study concluded that equine respiratory tract inflammation is minimal to absent for most horses traveling less than two

and a half hours, it is also well-documented in veterinary literature that horses traveling for more than four hours have an increased risk of developing pneumonia. Stop for a few minutes and allow horses to rest, cough, and drink. Offering water every 3-4 hours, even if they don't partake, is important because dehydration is the number one contributing factor to colic.

The Australian research group found that the longer the horses' journey, the higher the risk of respiratory problems, gastrointestinal problems, and death of any cause. Heat stroke, injury, and muscular problems did not have the same correlation with length of travel.

## The bottom line

Trailering horses may be necessary for medical care as well as recreation. Drivers should be confident, and the trailer and tack should be in good working order. Maintaining good hydration for horses and good air quality in the trailer are critical for preventing illness. Longer trips carry a higher risk; stopping for a break is important for both the driver and the horses.

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Photo page 30: Apache arrives safely at the David Canyon trail head in the Cibola National Forest near Tijeras. (Photo by Lisa Westfall.) Below: Ceasar and Megan at the Baylor Pass trail head on the west side of the Organ Mountains near Las Cruces. (Photo by Frank Rivera.)

