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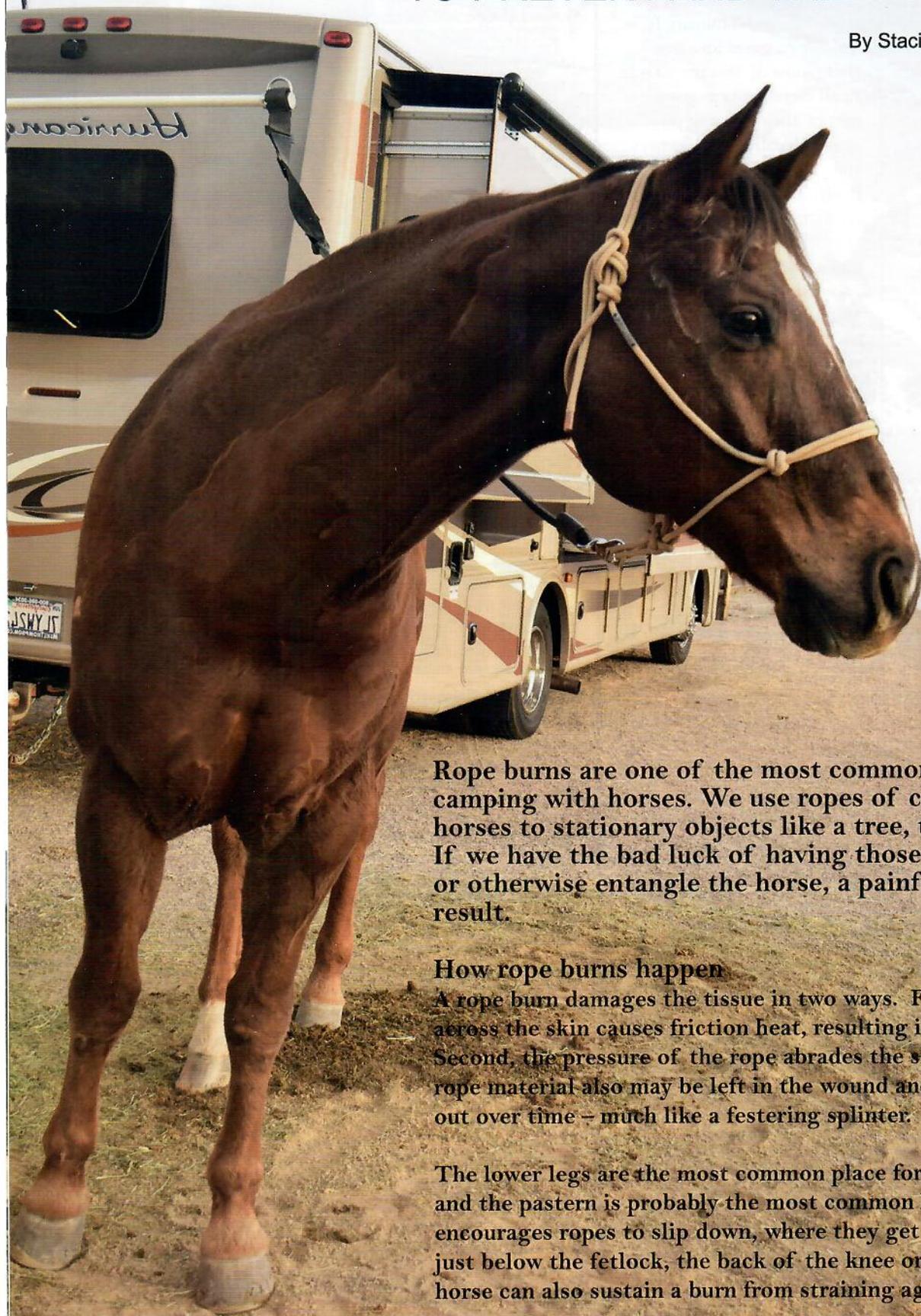
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AVOID THE BURN

YOUR HORSE LOOKS TO YOU
TO PREVENT AND TREAT ROPE BURNS

By Stacie G. Boswell, DMV, DACVS



Rope burns are one of the most common injuries when camping with horses. We use ropes of course to connect horses to stationary objects like a tree, the trailer or a post. If we have the bad luck of having those ropes loosen, slip or otherwise entangle the horse, a painful rope burn can result.

How rope burns happen

A rope burn damages the tissue in two ways. First, the rope sliding across the skin causes friction heat, resulting in thermal injury. Second, the pressure of the rope abrades the skin. Small particles of rope material also may be left in the wound and must work their way out over time – much like a festering splinter.

The lower legs are the most common place for a rope burn to happen, and the pastern is probably the most common location. Gravity encourages ropes to slip down, where they get caught, on the pastern just below the fetlock, the back of the knee or front of the hock. A horse can also sustain a burn from straining against hobbles.

Severity and healing time

Burns are classified by the depth of the tissue damage. First-degree burns are superficial, involving only the shallowest damage to the skin and hair. The tissue may be red and swollen. These usually need 2-3 weeks to heal. Second-degree burns remove most layers of the skin, leaving only the base layer that includes sweat gland ducts and hair follicles. Second-degree burns take 4-8 weeks to heal, and there is typically significant scarring.

Third-degree burns go even deeper, destroying all layers of the skin – including the embedded nerves. These wounds are too deep to be painful, and will have significant fluid seeping and potential infection. Fourth-degree burns destroy all layers of the skin, and cause damage to underlying muscle, tendons and bone. Third- and fourth-degree burns may take up to two years to heal.

A veterinarian should examine any burn as soon as possible. Complications involving deeper structures (joints, tendons, ligaments or bone) need immediate veterinary treatment if the horse is to return to full function.

How to treat

As with any injury, the first order of business on a fresh rope burn is to provide first aid.

- Clean it thoroughly. Cold hosing or icing the burn will reduce the pain and help quiet the inflammatory process.
- After cleaning the wound, a bandage should be placed. The clean, moist environment of a bandage facilitates healing and protects the exposed tissue. Silver sulfadiazine (SSD) cream is considered the best topical treatment for the wound. SSD is used on human burn victims, and is both soothing and antibacterial. *Never* use peroxide, scarlet oil, nitrofurazone, Cut-Heal, or Blue-Kote, ichthammol or anything else from the feed store that is colored. While these products are intended to decrease infection, they damage fragile new healing tissue of a burn wound.
- Expect that, as the burn heals, it can become very itchy. The topical SSD and bandaging will help soothe the itch.
- Pain relief such as “bute” (phenylbutazone) or Banamine (flunixin) may be administered to the horse for a few days. Both medications are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and will help reduce inflammation as well as provide pain relief.

Treatment of deeper wounds may include antibiotics to treat or prevent infection. Keep in mind that the burned tissue has a lack of blood supply, so the systemic antibiotics will not have a way of reaching all layers of the wound. This is one of the reasons why a moist, non-toxic, topical antibacterial product (SSD or VetriCyn) is important. Your veterinarian may also need to debride the wound – removing any debris and devitalized tissue – especially for deeper burns. Finally, further treatment for any joint infection or tendon damage may be required.

Preventing Rope Burns/Injury

The right training, equipment and habits can help you avoid rope burns and other injuries around the campsite.

- Use cotton ropes – they reduce thermal injury compared to other materials, although they do not eliminate it altogether. Cotton is also less likely to leave particles embedded in tissue.
- Make sure your horse is desensitized to objects and ropes touching his legs so he is less likely to panic if he becomes entangled.
- Tie with the right length of rope. Don't leave a lot of rope between the halter and tie ring/post/highline. A horse should be able to barely touch the ground with its nose. Longer lengths allow the horse to step over the rope, possibly resulting in entanglement.
- Examine the area where you tie. If there is any place the horse can get its rope caught (i.e. at the bottom edge of a trailer), it will.
- Train your horse to hobble at home if you plan to use them camping.
- Never tie your horse with his bridle on, even if there is also a halter. There is too much risk that he can break his jaw if the bit becomes caught on something.
- Also do not leave your horse standing with his bridle looped on the saddle horn. If the horse moves or shakes, the bridle can fall and entangle the horse.
- Make sure you are tying your horse to something very secure.
- Don't high-line with the saddle on. The horn can get caught.
- Tie using a quick-release knot.

After the burn

Long-term, a scar may impede the horse's function. Keeping the healed scar tissue moist and pliable while encouraging movement after the wound is closed will help minimize the scar. The scar will remodel over the course of two years and can change throughout the horse's lifetime.

The best chance of rapid healing with your horse returning to soundness function is good first-aid and early veterinary intervention. It is important to understand that these wounds will get worse before they start getting better. Most burns will heal favorably with patience and appropriate treatment. ■

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No matter where you tie, examine the area. Bottoms of trailers, branches, or a nearby horse are all places your horse could get entangled.