



ONE HOUR TO...

A brushup of veterinary exam manners

Transform your horse from a problem patient to a veterinarian's favorite with our five-point review of ground manners.

We all want our horses to lead willingly, stand still when asked and generally accept human contact, but ground manners take on critical importance when emergency veterinary care or even, for that matter, routine medical procedures are necessary. A patient who won't stand still or abide having his head touched, for instance, can be nearly impossible to examine or treat.

Your veterinarian can no doubt work around most behavioral problems, but the experience may leave everyone involved frustrated and exhausted.

In many cases, however, the horse's attitude is understandable, says Jennifer MacLeay, DVM, a clinician at Colorado State University veterinary school who is interested in equine behavior and training. "Horses who are handled in a 'veterinary' way only twice a year usually associate this type of handling with injections," she says. "So when I walk in with rubbing alcohol on my hands it's not surprising they object."

Fortunately it's not difficult to reinforce the basic ground manners needed to make a veterinary exam go smoothly. Spend an hour each month reviewing the following five exercises and you can ensure that your horse will be a cooperative patient the next time the veterinarian calls.



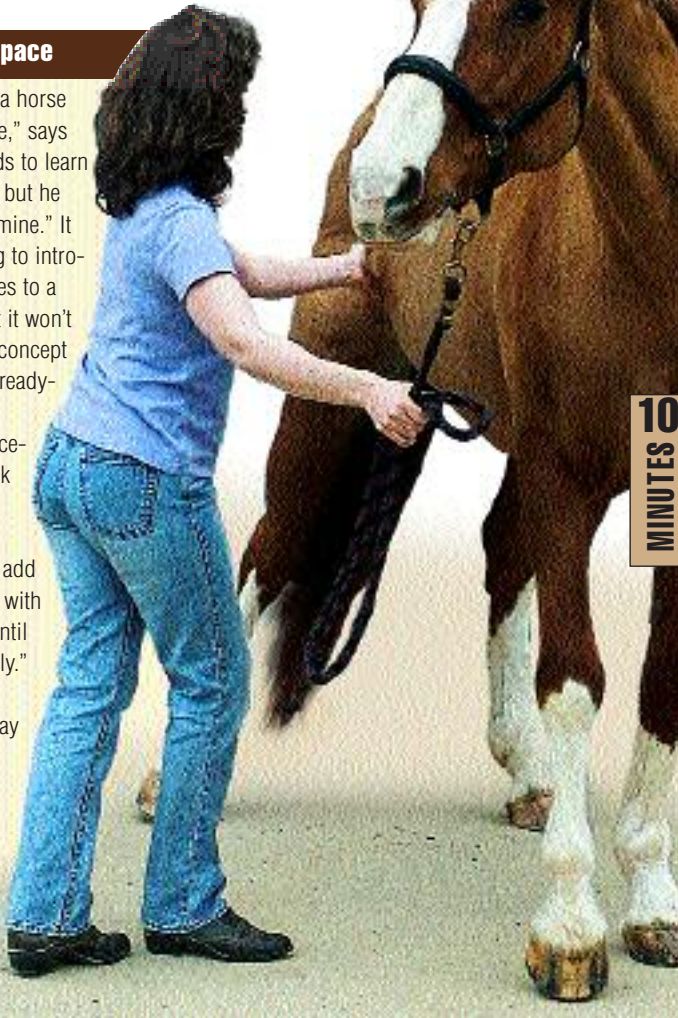
*By Christine Barakat
Photos by Celia Strain*

10
MINUTES

Establish personal space

"It's tough to examine a horse who is walking all over me," says MacLeay. "The horse needs to learn that I can be in his space, but he can't come charging into mine." It may take weeks of training to introduce the idea of boundaries to a young or green horse, but it won't take long to reinforce the concept of personal space in an already-educated horse.

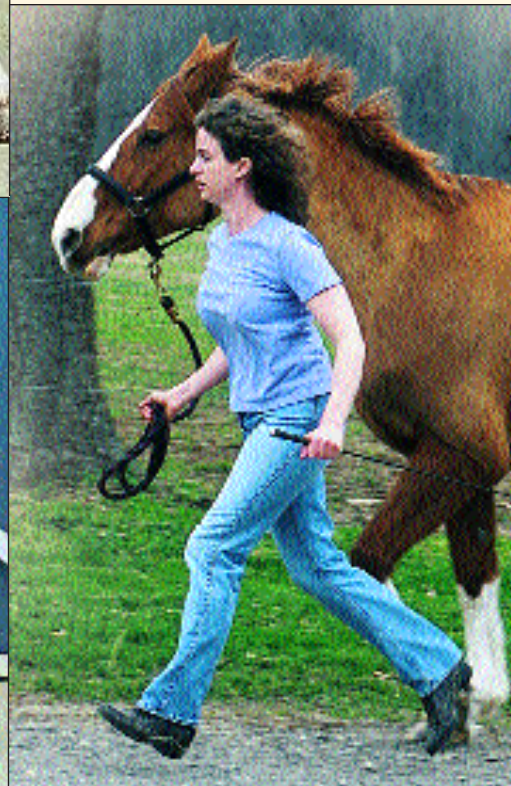
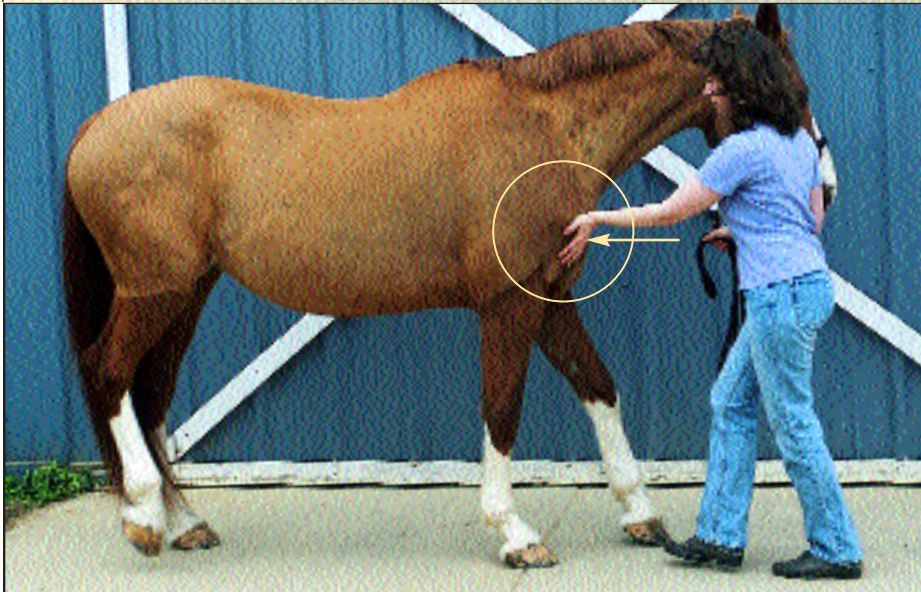
"It's just simple displacement," says MacLeay. "Ask the horse to back up by putting your hand on his chest. If he doesn't move, add some pressure or tap him with the butt of the lead rope until he does, then stop instantly." Likewise, ask the horse to move his hindquarters away from you. "Ideally, you'll want a horse that moves away quietly and without fear when you raise your hand and ask," she says. "And most horses will reach that point with enough reinforcement."



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MINUTES

Practice standing still

From a veterinarian's point of view a horse's willingness to stand still when asked is just as important as moving on cue. "We are always asking horses to move here or do this or go there," says MacLeay. "It's not surprising that so many find it hard to stand still." Spend a few minutes with your horse on a lead doing nothing. Scratch his ears if he enjoys it and let him doze. "Standing patiently and 'chilling out' is a very useful skill for any horse to have," says MacLeay.



15 Go through "trotting up" exercises

MINUTES

In most lameness exams, a horse is jogged in hand while the veterinarian observes. Obviously it's difficult to discern subtle gait irregularities when a horse has to be pulled along or refuses to jog at all.

To practice trotting up you need a straight, flat surface and a longeing or long dressage whip. Grasp the whip in your left hand and hold the lead, with a little slack, about a foot below the halter with your other hand. Face forward as you walk the horse, then cluck once or twice and begin to jog. If the horse doesn't immediately move off with you, *don't pull on the lead*, which will simply lead to more resistance. Instead, reach back behind yourself with the whip (while still 'jogging' and facing forward) and tap the horse gently on the shoulder. When the horse begins trotting stop tapping, but keep moving for 10 or 15 yards.

With enough repetition, your horse will learn to watch you and automatically begin to trot when he sees you start to jog. Note that maintaining slackness in the lead is important: Your veterinarian will be better able to detect a slight lameness if he or she can observe your horse's natural head motions.



15 Accustom your horse to handling about the head

MINUTES

A horse's eyes, ears and mouth are among the most challenging areas to examine and treat. Take a few minutes to rub your horse's ears, gently pry open his eyelids and lift his upper lip to reveal his teeth. If he objects, rub his head until he relaxes and then try again. With regular handling of these areas and reinforcement for good behavior, your horse will become more comfortable and eventually allow you to work around any part of his face.

10 Break negative associations

MINUTES

When preparing to administer an injection to the jugular vein, many veterinarians will stroke the injection site, and some savvy horses connect that sensation with an impending jab. Minimize the negative association—and the likelihood that a horse will act up prior to an injection—by regularly stroking your horse's neck, particularly the area over the jugular vein, which runs along the groove between the muscles at the underside of the neck and the ridge of the cervical vertebrae.



HAVE AN HOUR TO SPARE?

The One Hour To is designed to help readers find ways of making horsekeeping chores and horse-handling techniques easier, safer and less time-consuming. Do you have a chore that you would like some help with? Send suggestions to:

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