

# Baker & McVeigh Equine Hospital CAPE (PTY) LTD

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## Caring for your horse through surgery

At some stage, surgery may be required for your horse, either as an emergency procedure, for example colic (see previous information sheet) or as an elective procedure, for example arthroscopy for lameness investigation or a castration. This can be a stressful time for owners, but hopefully this article will inform you of all you need to know to ensure that the surgery goes smoothly and the outcome is a success.

### How can I help my horse before surgery?

#### Emergency Surgery

The need for emergency surgery can be a stressful and daunting time. In most circumstances there will be an attending vet on the scene that the owner has called. The primary concerns are to STABILIZE the horse, be it bandaging a wound, stemming bleeding, stabilizing a fracture or making a colicky horse comfortable enough to travel. Advice should be taken from the attending vet. They will have been in and dealt with these situations many, many times.

The referral centre/ hospital where the horse is going should be contacted and all the relevant information given to the vets that are on stand by.

Make sure that you have clear directions of how to reach the referral centre/hospital, with appropriate phone numbers to call on the way. It is always advisable to call the vet waiting, about 20 minutes before arrival. Ensure that the box or trailer has good, clean bedding and is a well serviced, road worthy vehicle. It is not advised that somebody travels in the box with the horse as this can be very dangerous. Your attending vet will pass on any case details to the vets waiting at the hospital.

#### Elective Surgery

For elective surgeries, you will have had time to plan and discuss everything thoroughly with your vet. If your horse is going in the day before surgery, your vets may ask for you not to feed the horse. This may be especially true for any abdominal surgery. The lack of large amounts of food material in the horse's GI tract will make the surgeon's job much easier. Also the weight of a full stomach on the horse's respiratory apparatus (lungs and diaphragm) can make it harder for them to breathe when under general anaesthesia.

Your vets will most likely remove the horse's shoes. This is to protect them from damaging themselves as they recover from anaesthesia.

Most hospitals will request that the horse is admitted the day before surgery.

## What type of care will my horse need after surgery?

### Diet

If your horse has had colic surgery then close attention will need to be paid to the horse's diet. Your vet will provide instructions on how to slowly re-introduce your horse back to its normal diet. They will often request that the oat hay/roughage is soaked.

Horses recovering from orthopaedic procedures will most likely be out of work or in a rehabilitation program, therefore requiring a reduction in their energy intake.

All horses on a reduced exercise plan, especially when on box rest are at risk of getting colic due to reduced gut movement which can cause pelvic flexure or sternal flexure impactions. Monitor the volume and consistency of your horse's droppings carefully. Soaking the roughage, hand picking grass and adding oil to the feed can all help reduce the chance of decreased gut motility.

Some horses on box rest start to 'bolt' their hard feed and eat very quickly. By placing a couple of bricks in the feed manger, this will slow down the rate of eating as the horse has to work around the brick.



### Care of wounds and bandages

You should receive specific instructions if your horse returns home in a bandage or cast. You should be informed when the bandage is to be changed and when any sutures are to be removed. If you are not happy to manage a horse with surgical bandages then say so!!! Your vet can give you specific training in what to do, and your degree of expertise will be a factor in determining at what point the horse returns home.

Your horse may return home with an open wound. You should be given clear instructions on how to clean the wound and what with. If you're not sure ask your vet as the wrong 'lotions and potions' can be very detrimental.

Any sudden change in comfort level and lameness or discharge from a wound should be reported to your vet immediately.

Horses in casts need a lot of attention. Due to the nature of a cast, they cannot be removed easily and it is hard to know exactly what is going on underneath the cast. Casts are used to stabilise fractures and immobilize limbs with big open, non healing wounds. One of the main risks is cast sores. If your horse comes home in a cast, you should receive very strict guidelines and your vet should come and check the cast regularly.

### Exercise

Horses that have had orthopaedic surgery will be given a strict rehabilitation program for you to follow. This may involve a period of box rest followed by hand walking. Other rehabilitation treatments may also be required including shock wave therapy, or joint treatments etc.

Unrestricted exercise or turnout can be disastrous for the healing of some orthopaedic injuries. Slowly increasing the size of the paddock turnout and the use of sedation may be necessary initially.

Some horses tolerate box rest very poorly and depending on their condition, play pen paddocks may be of benefit, but liaise with your vet about this. Some horses are helped by placing stable toys, salt licks and mirrors in their box, or by having a companion kept in the next door stable, or even by playing music to them/leaving the radio on!

Some horses may require mild sedation with something like ACP when they first come home and are on restricted exercise regimes.

Colic surgeries will always require a period of complete box rest to allow the abdominal muscles to knit back together and gain strength. This is usually around 6 weeks which is then followed by a further 6 weeks of very small paddock turnout at which time the horse can usually return to light exercise. So you are looking at a minimum rehab period of 3 months.

### Behaviour

Some horses can become quite depressed or agitated when on box rest, all of which can affect their healing process. Some horses may require mild sedation to settle them.

Simple changes to the environment, like making sure they have a good view from their stable, can see companions, have stable toys and mirrors can all perk a depressed horse up. Horses need stimulation, so regular grooming and attention are vital. A horse's happiness is vital to a good recovery!!



A bit of TLC goes a long way!!!



Who's that handsome chap?!!!!