

Baker & McVeigh Equine Hospital CAPE (PTY) LTD

Dr. J. McVeigh B.V.M.S M.R.C.V.S. - Principal
Dr. A.G Cameron B.V.M.S M.R.C.V.S - Partner
Dr. D. Timpson B.V.Sc M.R.C.V.S - Partner
Dr. A. Clements B.V.Sc Cert.E.S (Orth) M.R.C.V.S - Partner
Dr. E. Alsop B.V.Sc Cert.E.M (Intmed) M.R.C.V.S
Dr. B. Gillespie B.V.Sc BSc



P.O Box 55290, Sunset Beach, 7435

Tel: +27 (21) 552 3450

Fax: +27 (21) 552 3225

Email: cape@mcveigh.co.za

Website: www.bakermcveigh.com

DURBAN, SA

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NEWMARKET, UK

YORKSHIRE, UK

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TRAVELLING LONG DISTANCES WITH YOUR HORSE

Travelling horses long distances can be stressful for horse and owner, but with careful planning, good preparation and some veterinary advice, it can be made much easier. This article aims to give guidance on how to make long distance trucking of horses less stressful.



VEHICLE PREPARATION

Ensure that your vehicle and trailer are fully serviced and completely road worthy. Check lights, brakes, doors, floors, vents and windows, tyre pressure and spare tyres. Ensure that the trailer has adequate ventilation for a long journey and that there is adequate space for the size of the horses being transported

HORSE PREPARATION

Knowing and understanding what is normal for your horse is the key to the early recognition of when things are not normal.

TPR

This stands for temperature, pulse and respiration rate. Take your horses TPR on a daily basis for the week running up to the journey and keep a log book of what is normal for your horse.

Normal values:

T 36.7-38.3

HR 24-44 beats per minute

RR 8-16 breaths per minute- the horses breathing should be easy with no 'abdominal effort' and no nostril flaring.

Assessing Hydration status

Your horse's gums should be a pale salmon pink and feel moist to the touch.

When you pinch your horse's skin over the shoulder region it should 'ping' back into place quickly and feel nice and elastic.

Feeding

In the time leading up to travelling, don't make any major changes to your horses diet. Horses are creatures of habit and like routine. The hind gut is also a delicate balance of bacteria which can be easily upset by rapid dietary changes. But it may be prudent to start adding small amounts of salt (1-2 heaped teaspoons) to your horses feed to encourage the horse to drink more.

Ensure that you have enough roughage for the journey and the stay away so that your horse can continue to receive the same hay/lucerne/ teff as he does when at home.

First Aid Kit

Make sure that you have a fully stocked first aid kit to travel with and the names and contacts of veterinarians en route and at your destination. The first aid kit should include:

Cotton wool

Crepe bandages

Elastoplast

Vetrap /cohesive bandages

Gauze swabs

Clean nappies

Thermometer

Scissors

Disinfectant (savlon, pevidine iodine, hibiscrub, mediscrub etc)

Eye wash

Health Documentation

Prior to leaving ensure that your horse meets all the health and vaccination requirements for where you are travelling to and for the governing body of whom you

are competing under. If in any doubt about movement restrictions with regards to African Horse Sickness then it is best to contact your State Veterinarian.

ON THE JOURNEY

Bedding

Ensure there is adequate bedding in the trailer to absorb urine and faeces

Halter

Ensure the head collar has a breakaway feature

Eating

Ensure that your horse has a good supply of hay that he normally eats at home for the journey. This will keep your horse occupied, reduce stress and the chewing will produce saliva which helps protect from gastric ulceration (see earlier information sheet). The hay should be placed in a hay net, tied up at chest height.

Journey Breaks

Stop every 4-6 hours for 20 minutes or so. This gives your horse time to relax and 'unlock' his muscles. Offer water at every stop- preferably water from home-, but don't be surprised if your horse does not drink a lot at first. Refill the haynet, check blankets (is your horse warm enough/sweating and too hot?) and trailer vents.

Overnight Stopovers

Some journeys will require an overnight stop. After unloading your horse, take him for a good long hand graze, letting him roll and stretch his legs. Keep the feeding regime similar to that of home but decreasing the concentrates/grains/hard feed slightly. If possible feed from the ground and feed roughage from the ground to encourage the horse to put his head down so that the respiratory tract can drain and help the horse clear all the dust and dirt accumulated during travelling. If possible, provide water from home. Check your horses TPR once he has settled in.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON CONDITIONS THAT CAN OCCUR AND WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

Two of the most common complications that can occur with regards to your horse's health and travelling are colic and respiratory infection ('Travel Sickness').

Colic

The colic is most commonly due to dehydration which leads to an impaction colic of the large colon, most commonly the pelvic or sternal flexure. Colic signs include (please see previous information sheet for more details on colic):

Flank watching

Rolling

Scraping/pawing the ground

Sweating

No faeces passed during the journey or upon arrival

Lip curling

If you are concerned that your horse has colic then you must call your vet immediately.

How can I help prevent this?

It is a very common practice for your veterinarian to perform a 'pre travel' treatment on your horse to try to ensure that the horse is fully hydrated. This involves the horse being nasogastric drenched with oil, water and electrolytes. It may be prudent to also place your horse on anti ulcer medication for a few days prior to travelling, throughout the journey and for a few days after arrival. Your vet can advise on this (see previous information sheet on gastric ulcers).

If it is extremely hot or your horse is competing in strenuous exercise very soon after arrival, then your vet may also advise that the horse receives intravenous fluids.

By adding a small amount of salt to your horses feed a few days before travelling, can also encourage your horse to drink more himself.

If there is a stop over then it may be advisable to soak the horse's hay/Lucerne to increase the water intake.

If possible use water from home.

If your horse is a bad or anxious traveller then your vet may suggest a mild sedative such as ACP.

Respiratory Infection 'Travel Sickness'

Travel sickness is also known as shipping fever or the medical term of pleuropneumonia. It is a disease of the lung tissue and surrounding pleural cavity. It came to attention during the Boer and First World Wars due to the movement of large numbers of horses by sea and land transportation. In fact in World War One it accounted for three times as many deaths as any other cause in transit.



Why does it occur?

It is not an infectious disease but an individual horse disease. There are many factors contributing to whether your horse will succumb to travel sickness or not including length of journey, the weather and individual horse immune system function.

In the normal healthy horse there are bacteria that live within the respiratory tract. The horse's own inbuilt defense mechanisms on a day to day basis prevent these bacteria from invading the lower airways and setting up infection and the development of pleuropneumonia. One of the main defense mechanisms is the MUCOCILIARY CLEARANCE system which continually moves mucus, debris and bacteria up the respiratory tract away from the lungs. For this to function most effectively, the horse must be able to get his head down, in a non dust environment. When travelling long distances, the horse's head is continually elevated, allowing bacteria and secretions to accumulate in the lower airways. Stress has also been linked with suppressing the action of the specialized cells that function in the lower airways by clearing up debris. This then gives bacteria the chance to colonize the lower airways, replicate and set up infection. As infection spreads to the pleural cavity, this fills up with fluid, thus compressing the already consolidated lungs further, leading to even more respiratory distress.

Pleuropneumonia can be life threatening and needs early recognition and aggressive veterinary treatment for a successful outcome. Some of the signs include:

Fever/temperature

Depression

Lethargy

Anorexia/inappetance

High respiratory rate with an abdominal effort and nostril flaring.

Nasal discharge

Coughing

Reluctance to move, with a stiff stilted stride, often confused with laminitis or foot pain
Your horse may grunt when you press behind the elbows on the chest and be reluctant to turn.

How can I help prevent this?

One of the most important things to do is try to achieve head lowering. Short periods of 30 minutes per 6 hours travelling have been shown NOT to be enough. 8-12 hours are required for every 24 hours of travelling, so if your journey is over twelve hours long then stop over night. Then at your over night stabling, feed your horse from the ground. Avoid strenuous exercise prior to travelling and just after long journeys.

Allow for adequate rest stops where water is offered each time.

Stop over night for long journeys.

Hang the travelling hay nets at chest height, rather than head height.

Record your horses TPR values for a week before leaving so you know what is normal.

Should I give my horse antibiotics?

This is a contentious issue. Large studies are difficult to perform as there are so many variables involved in travelling horses and the factors that lead to pleuropneumonia. The research that is available suggests that the use of antibiotics does not reduce the risk of your horse getting shipping fever and that the most important factor is head position and giving your horse time to get his head down every 12 hours.

If you want to consider using antibiotics then each individual case is best discussed with your vet. There is huge over use and misuse of antibiotics within the veterinary industry, leading to antimicrobial resistance which is potentially a huge human health threat.

There is some evidence for the use of immunostimulants such as Interferon alpha and drugs that affect the mucociliary clearance system such as Clenbuterol, but no drug is better than good preparation, ensuring you travel a healthy horse, minimizing stress, ensuring good ventilation on the transport and again, ensuring adequate head lowering time.

If you are travelling your horse over long distances and require further advice, then please call the practice on 0215523450.