



Introduction

Responses to incidents such as an animal down or trapped are often initiated by the owner, bystanders, or first responders to get to the scene. To prevent injury to both people (responders) and to the patient (the large animal(s) involved) - and to improve the odds of a favorable outcome - best practices should be employed. This reference sheet has been developed as a quick best practice guide for situations where animals are found involuntarily down, recumbent, or medically unstable. A veterinarian should be the first person contacted to assist with any efforts to stabilize or provide first aid to animals involved.

Best Practices for the Sternal Recovery Position for Large Animals

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First Rule:

- Unless the veterinarian on scene says so, getting the horse, cow or camelid to standing position is not required immediately - stabilize instead.
- They are much safer on the ground in sternal positions than standing if they cannot support themselves.



It is common when approached, especially with a halter, for a horse to rise. If the horse remains lying down, additional observations are warranted. Photo: Rebecca Husted

The Sternal Position

- The sternal position (on its chest) is the Recovery Position for large animals.
- This is so that they can breathe better, gain their mentation, improve homeostasis status by blowing off the effects of drugs or toxins through their airways, returning to normal temperature, etc.
- For humans, it is on our sides in a fetal position.
- For large animals like horses, cattle and camelids- it is on their chest.

*Note: An animal that is dragged, lifted, whipped, cattle prodded, scared, or forced to stand when it is not ready to do so can fall and that is MUCH worse for their prognosis.

- Falling horses can break legs, necks, and cause really serious damage to themselves in many ways.
- Do not try to force the horse to rise by cracking whips, clucking, kissing, screaming, pulling on ropes, whipping the horse, etc.
- Letting them rest and catch their second wind or return to normal temperature and homeostasis is usually the best practice *unless the veterinarian says differently.*

What You Can Do to Stabilize the Downed Horse

*Note: Cattle and camelids are similar

Roll them from lateral recumbency to sternal recumbency

- Support them at the shoulder so that they stay sternal.
- It is safer to lean back and put your lower back weight against their wither (as shown on the photo in the right) and stay away from the legs as much as possible.
- If they struggle, roll or fall, they will push your body away from the horse.
- If not, you can end up under a thrashing horse.

Dr. Jennifer Proctor in this photo is demonstrating the safer position with a colicking painful horse, and is in the position that she can move out of the way if she feels the horse is moving out of control – she has an escape route.

(Photos by Dr. Rebecca Husted)

Protect from Environmental Temperatures

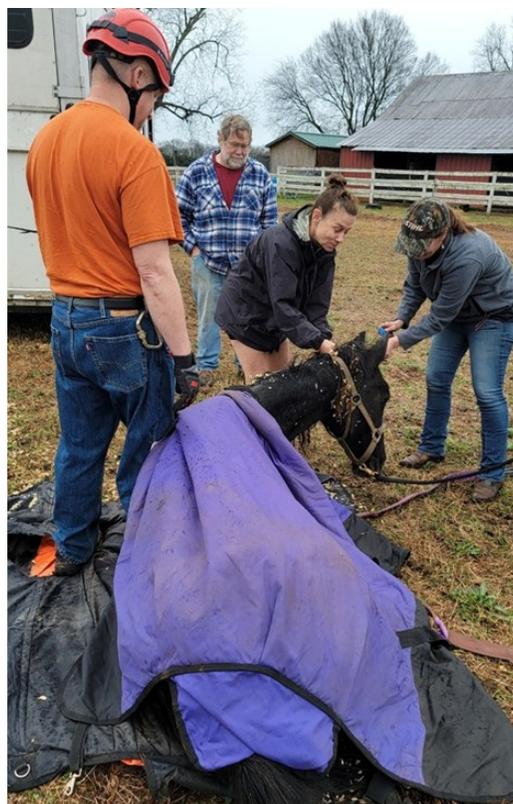
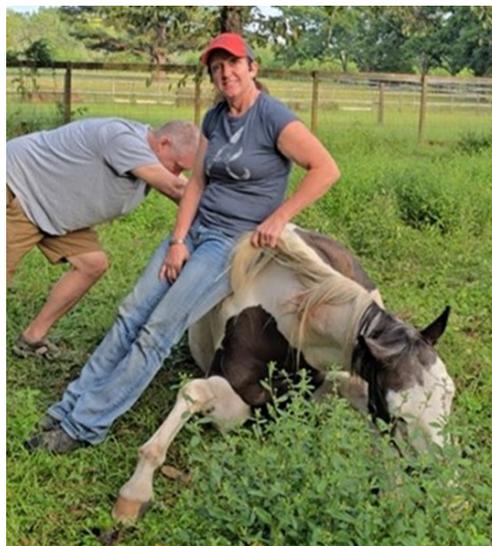
- If they are down/recumbent on ice, snow or mud, or in low temperatures or high winds, put a tarp, blanket, or glide under the animal to provide a barrier to the cold ground.
- Provide insulation to the rest of the animal (blankets, heated blankets, etc.)
- If they are recumbent on hot asphalt or sand in the blazing sun, protect them from further heating and thermal skin injury. As soon as they are secured on a glide, move them, or hose them down, to cool their surfaces.

Protect the Head and Eyes

- Use padding in case they roll back to lateral position.
- A head protector is best, but a hoodie/shirt, PFD from the fire truck, or saddle pads and horse blankets can be utilized.

Get rectal temperature, pulse rate, respiration rates

- Take every 10 minutes and have a scribe write them down and give to the veterinarian.
- This is crucial to understand what is going on medically in the animal over time.



Provide warming or cooling where warranted.

- If the animal is hypothermic (too cold), get warm air going under the blankets – a field expedient tent made of a tarp with a blow dryer is effective to hold heat.
- Do not rub the cold skin of a down animal.
- If hyperthermic (overheated), provide shade while the animal is down in the sun and hot environmental conditions – a tarp held over its body, a snap together tent, an umbrella over its head, or an electric fan off the fire truck and misted water can maintain evaporative moving air to help cool the animal quickly.

Fluids to combat dehydration

- Start with providing clean water to drink above 10 deg C (50 deg F).
- The veterinarian may consider maintaining flow of warmed fluids into the vein through an IV catheter.

Eating

- For most situations, if the animal wishes to eat hay or graze – they may.
- Always ask the veterinarian first.
- Do not offer grain unless the veterinarian approves it.

Keep people around the animal calm and quiet so that the animal can relax and prepare to stand.

- Stressed and scared animals flail to get up in panic.
- If necessary - hay bales can sometimes be used to stabilize into sternal for transport.

An adult horse down involuntarily on the ground for long periods (more than 20 minutes) is a medical emergency - CALL YOUR VETERINARIAN IMMEDIATELY and provide photos and a short 10-second video of the animal's situation as the responders are coming to help you.

Learn more about rescue techniques: take Equine Guelph's [On-Demand Large Animal Emergency Rescue Awareness Level Course](#), and [subscribe to our eNews](#) for information about in-person training sessions!

