

# Trailerling Your Horse Safely





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COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY  
OFFICE OF THE FIRST LADY



*Jane Beshear*

Dear Fellow Equine Enthusiasts,

As a horse owner and First Lady of the Commonwealth, I understand the significance of the horse to Kentucky. We have long been known as the “Horse Capital of the World” and to ensure we retain this title, we must focus on the health and welfare of horse and rider. This is why I am proud to support Saddle Up Safely, a rider safety awareness program sponsored by the University of Kentucky Ag Equine Programs and UK HealthCare.

While most people associate horse-related injuries with riding, many accidents take place while traveling to shows, the vet or riding destinations. In fact, 10 percent of injuries to equestrians happen when loading and unloading their horse from a trailer.

Therefore, it is important to take precautions to make sure that you, your horse and others on the road have the safest trailer experience possible. This booklet has many useful tips to help you load, transport and unload your horse to better ensure a smooth and uneventful trip.

This booklet, combined with its sister publication, *Travel to a New Environment*, will give you key information and tips for safely traveling to new places with your horse. After reading the information presented in these two booklets, test your knowledge of equestrian safety by taking any of the five online quizzes at [saddleupsafely.org](http://saddleupsafely.org). Also, be sure to download the checklist for safe travels and trailering your horse for reference when preparing to travel.

Accidents are avoidable if you take time to educate yourself on proper safety techniques. By taking time to prepare for travel with your horse, you can help ensure a pleasant experience for all involved.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jane Beshear".

Jane K. Beshear

First Lady of the Commonwealth of Kentucky





## Introduction

Whether you're trail riding, showing, going to the veterinarian or evacuating in the event of an emergency, you'll need to trailer most horses sometime in their lives. Knowing the fundamentals will increase your likelihood of a smooth, safe experience. Learning from horsepeople experienced with loading and unloading horses from a trailer is usually a good idea. This booklet can be a good reference and additional resources are noted in the back.

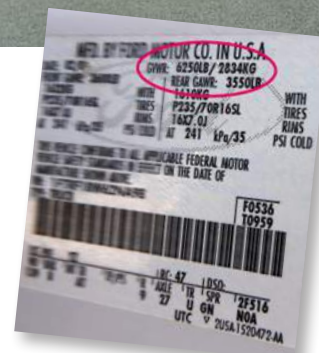


## Understanding your equipment

Know what your truck or vehicle is capable of towing safely. Check the owner's manual. Don't assume that because your tow vehicle CAN tow a load it can SAFELY tow/stop the load. Trucks with large tow ratings usually have high-performance features such as heavy-duty engines, springs, transmissions, frames, U-joints, rear axles and brakes. These features have nothing to do with whether the truck is called a three-quarter-ton or half-ton – those refer to payload, or how much it can carry in the cab and back. Before towing, you also need to consider how much weight the truck can carry and tow at the same time; this is referred to as the gross combination weight rating (GCWR). This includes the weight of the truck, the trailer it can tow, and the total cargo the truck and trailer can carry. GCWR information can be found in the owner's manual or on the tag located in the truck's doorjamb or behind its seat. If you don't know, don't guess, ask the seller or your mechanic.

Trailers have a manufacturer's plate listing the vehicle identification number (VIN) and the gross vehicle weight rating (GCWR), which is the manufacturer's recommended capacity for the trailer. This rating includes the weight of the trailer and anything being hauled in it.

Also know the maximum towing capacity of the entire hitch assembly. The hitch assembly consists of the receiver, the insert, the ball and the tow vehicle. Each component has a rating of how much weight it can safely tow. The weight of the trailer and its load should never exceed the rating of any hitch assembly component. Keep in mind when pulling a tow-behind/bumper-pull trailer that hitches on the tow vehicle can be attached to the bumper or attached to the frame. Those attaching to the frame usually have a higher rating. Be sure to check hitch components each time you pull your trailer. Look for signs of rust and corrosion, bent or cracked components, and other signs that any of the components may be failing. Check the ball to make sure it is tightly attached to the ball mount.





## Choosing a trailer

There are many types of trailers. One of the biggest decisions horse owners face when choosing a trailer is whether to purchase a tow-behind/bumper-pull versus a gooseneck or fifth wheel. There are also straight loads, slant loads and stock trailers. Choose the trailer that is best for your needs.

The safest horse trailers allow the handler to access each horse and to load/unload each horse individually without disturbing or unloading the others. In the case of emergency, this feature will make a big difference in making the best of a bad situation.

Be sure you have the right hookup for your trailer choice. If pulling a tow-behind/bumper-pull trailer, make sure the hitch receiver is rated for the weight you will be towing. All trailers should have electric brakes, safety chains and a breakaway brake. If you are pulling a tow-behind/bumper-pull, it is highly recommended to use a weight distribution hitch to increase the capacity of the hitch and to distribute the tongue weight so the combination travels optimally as one unit. If a trailer is swaying, there is usually a reason, such as uneven tire pressure, unlevel trailer, axle problems, etc. An anti-sway bar can be helpful if you travel in high wind conditions or have a short-base vehicle. Make sure the hitch is positioned so that the trailer is level behind the towing vehicle, giving the horse a level platform on which to stand. Cross the safety chains under the hitch when pulling a tow-behind/bumper-pull trailer. This method will stop the trailer tongue from dropping to the ground if the trailer becomes unhitched. Make sure you have mirrors mounted on your vehicle for towing and that they are properly adjusted for optimal visibility of the trailer and the road around it.

When choosing your trailer, make sure it is big enough to accommodate your horse(s) comfortably. Trailers come in many widths and heights. Your horse should have adequate height to comfortably raise his head without hitting his ears. The rule of thumb is that the ceiling should be 10 inches above the normal resting height of your horse's head. Your horse should have at least 3 inches on each side of his body when in the trailer stall for lateral movement. When choosing a trailer, keep in mind that the horse will need to brace when stopping and starting and should be able to have a wide enough stance to do that when in his or her stall.



## Trailer safety and maintenance tips

If trailering is new to you, first practice driving the rig with the trailer empty. Know how to hook up the trailer, park and back up before you go out on the road. Depending on the combined weight of the truck and trailer, a commercial driver's license (CDL) might be required. Check with your local motor vehicle department.

Trailer maintenance is important to increase your likelihood of having a safe trip. At least once a year you should pull up your trailer mats and inspect the flooring of your trailer. Check wood flooring for signs of dry rot and aluminum floors for stress fractures. Pull the wheels off the trailer and inspect the brakes for wear and have the wheel bearings greased. Inspect the trailer for worn parts such as bolt holes and broken welds. Check the tires for dry rot. Lights should be checked every trip before you load the horses. If you are unsure about these processes, have a professional inspect your trailer. Check whether your state requires trailer inspections.



## Preparing your horse for a trip

Some people put protective gear on their horses when trailering – others don't. Shipping bandages or boots protect the horse's legs and provide support while traveling. Shipping bandages are often thought to provide superior support and protection over the shipping boots, but if they are improperly applied they can cause damage to the soft tissue of the legs. If you choose to use the bandages instead of shipping boots, learn how to wrap them properly. A poorly applied shipping bandage may come loose during trailering, causing a safety hazard for you and your horse. Many people choose the shipping boots rather than the bandages as they are quicker and easier to apply. Some horses are stressed and uncomfortable wearing leg protection, so try them before trailering your horse to see whether he's comfortable. Head bumpers are also available to protect a horse's poll (the top of his head) from impact while in the trailer.





## Loading your trailer

When parking your trailer to load or unload your horse, you want the trailer as level as possible. Make sure the footing is good, and avoid asphalt, loose gravel, ice and mud, as they can be a slip hazard when loading and unloading. Load in an area with good lighting and use your trailer's interior lighting. If you are trailering one horse in a two-horse straight-load trailer, always load the horse on the driver's side. If you are loading two horses, put the heavier horse on the driver's side. Most roads have a crown and the heavier horse on the driver's side will help stabilize the trailer if the passenger side wheels go off the road. When hauling in a slant-load trailer, try to keep the load centered over the axles.



## Loading checklist

- ☐ Be sure there's an escape route for you to exit the trailer after leading your horse inside.
- ☐ Make sure partitions separating horses are secure.
- ☐ Never tie the horse until the butt bar is up.
- ☐ Always make a final check of trailer, hitch, lights and towing vehicle.

## Could this happen to you?

"A friend was having trouble loading her horse. After getting him in her two-horse slant-steel trailer, she asked for someone to quickly close the back door. Just as I stepped on the ramp the horse ran out backward, kicking the door into my head/face. I was knocked out . . . but luckily the door swung me out of the way from being stepped on, plus the horse stopped. They rushed me to the ER. My left eye was black with a huge hematoma over that eye, my glasses were scratched and twisted a little . . . but I say they saved my eye from getting damaged worse. The handle of the door hit me square in the eye/head when the door pounded open. The ER bill was almost \$5,000. I spent a horrible night . . . and next week. My friend went back to the trailer to see what could have frightened her horse to fly out backwards while she was trying to load . . . there it was . . . a hornet nest right up over the head where she would have tied him. We don't know if he looked up then freaked out . . . or was possibly stung. Check those trailers for hornet nests BEFORE you load."

*ADVICE: Always check your trailer inside and out to make sure it is horse- and road-ready.*



## Trailer checklist

Before any trip with your trailer, you should:

- ☐ Know if your vehicle is rated to safely tow your trailer.
- ☐ Know the maximum towing capacity of the hitch and vehicle, e.g. the gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) – make sure you're not exceeding it with your trailer and its contents.
- ☐ Practice driving the trailer before putting a horse in it.
- ☐ Verify all your lights are working.
- ☐ Adjust the electric brakes for the load you will be towing.
- ☐ Check the brakes and breakaway brake battery.
- ☐ Check tire tread and make sure tires are rated for the weight you are pulling.
- ☐ Check tire air pressure and use the manufacturer's suggested air pressure.
- ☐ Inspect the trailer mats and flooring.
- ☐ Check for insects, rodent damage and birds/bird nests.
- ☐ Ensure the trailer is solidly connected to the tow vehicle and appropriately locked in place. Check the hitch.
- ☐ Have a good spare tire for the tow vehicle and one for the trailer.
- ☐ Keep a portable air compressor in your vehicle.
- ☐ Make sure your jack and tire iron are appropriate for your trailer and tow vehicle.
- ☐ Make sure you have a working fire extinguisher, reflective safety triangles or hazard flares in your vehicle in the event of a breakdown.





## Things to bring

- Supply of your own feed and/or water.
- Bedding (for inside the trailer and at your destination if your horse will be stalled).
- Spare halters and lead ropes.
- Buckets for offering feed and water (smaller buckets are sometimes easier to manage).
- Flashlight.
- First-aid kit (people and horse).
- Veterinarian contact information along route.
- Shovel and bucket to pick up manure.
- Knife.
- Have all the important paperwork ready, such as health certificates and proof of a negative Coggins test.



# W H I L E T R A V E L I N G

Your horses are loaded, you have checked and double-checked your lists, and you are ready to roll. Long trips (greater than five hours) can be very stressful on a horse. Some things to consider when you are on the road:

## Hydration

Some horses refuse to drink while on the road; they often don't like unfamiliar water. You can pack water from home, but it is a good idea to get your horse used to drinking flavored water to mask the taste of the water from different sources. Talk with your veterinarian about ways to encourage your horse to drink. Dehydration is common when traveling long distances. Horses can lose two to five pounds of body weight for every hour they travel and even more if the weather is hot. You should offer your horse water at least every two to four hours while traveling.

## Regular chances to rest

You should plan for frequent stops as many horses will not urinate while the trailer is moving. Monitor your horses regularly, taking the time to do a quick visual check of each horse at each rest stop. When making a stop, try to park where you can keep an eye on your horse. Some trailers are equipped with cameras and you can keep an eye on the horses as they travel. Because most horses are tied when traveling, they can have a harder time clearing dust, bacteria and other foreign substances from their respiratory systems. To minimize possible respiratory complications, it is a good practice to plan to travel no more than eight hours without a layover or rest stop. Horses should be unloaded and allowed to move around and stretch.

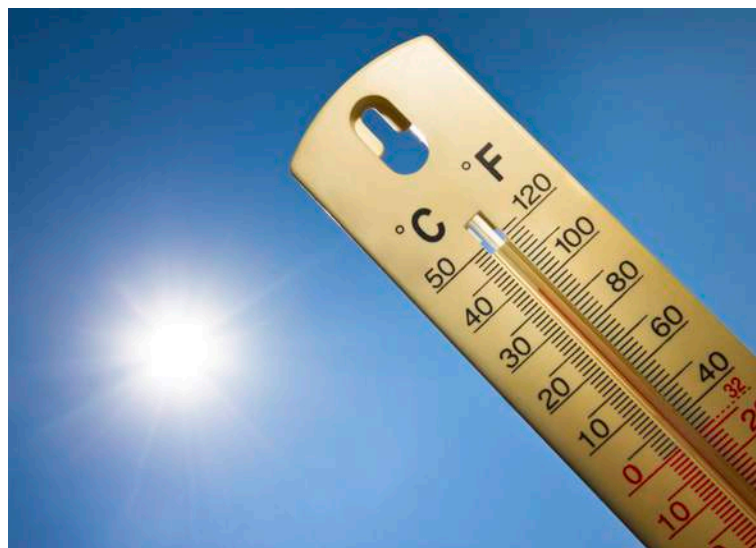






## Temperature control

Monitor the temperature inside the trailer frequently. On hot days the temperature can soar in a short amount of time, especially when the trailer is stopped. Look for shade when stopping for any length of time. Even in cooler weather, the temperature in the trailer can get quite warm for a horse with a winter coat or wearing a blanket. Check horses often for sweating. Many trailers have drop-down windows, and while it might be tempting to allow your horse to hang his or her head out while the trailer is moving, there is a risk of injury, so do not allow it. Consider using a fly mask to shield your horses eyes from bugs and foreign objects or, if the windows have guard netting, they can remain open. Also open roof vents to provide air circulation.



## Careful driving

Finally, be considerate of your equine passengers. Give the horse time to prepare for stops, don't accelerate quickly, and make sure the trailer has cleared the turn, has straightened out, and the horses have regained their balance before you return to normal speed. Travel over bumpy roads carefully. Riding in a trailer is work for the horse, as it takes substantial effort to keep his balance in a moving vehicle. Minimize the noise in your trailer. Horse's ears are very sensitive to sounds and constant noise is stressful. Once arriving at your destination, allow your horse time to recover before you start a demanding workout.

### Travel checklist

- ☐ Offer your horse water every two to four hours.
- ☐ Provide frequent breaks.
- ☐ Monitor temperature inside the trailer.
- ☐ Consult your veterinarian and learn the early signs of dehydration in a horse.



## Commercial haulers

If it is necessary to hire someone to haul your horse, whether to a local show or across the country, you will want to seek a reputable hauler. Consider the following before choosing someone to transport your horse:

- Is the person licensed to haul horses commercially?  
All licensed commercial haulers must have a U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) number on their truck.
- Ask how long the trip will take. Many haulers pick up several horses along a route and it may take your horse several days to a week to get to his destination.
- Ask if there will be stops and layovers. It is crucial that the hauler offers your horse time to rest if the trip will take several days.
- Get references from the hauler. If he or she is experienced and has a good reputation, giving you references shouldn't be a problem.
- Ask about the type of trailer the hauler has. Will it be able to accommodate your horse's size? Are the truck and trailer in good repair?
- Make sure you have a contact number for the hauler and that he or she has your contact number.



## While in transit

Always plan for the unexpected when traveling. Consider purchasing a membership to a roadside assistance plan. Make sure they will tow your horse trailer. Many plans do not cover loaded horse trailers, so carefully check your plan.

Realize that your horse may be excited and nervous about being in a new environment. Always be extra vigilant when handling him or her to ensure both your safety and the horse's. Know how your horse loads and unloads so you can anticipate any problems. When you arrive at your destination, check in with officials or organizers if applicable. They will be able to direct you to the correct parking and stabling location and give you any necessary instructions regarding rules and regulations of the facility. Remember to keep both you and your horse hydrated upon arrival.





## Unloading

Prior to unloading your horse, examine the area for potential problems such as objects protruding from the ground, poor footing, dim lighting, traffic, blowing tents and loose dogs. Avoid as many of these as possible. Plan your route from the trailer to the stall or gathering place to avoid as many of these kind of problems as possible.

If you have someone helping you with the unloading, you should review the steps they should follow. Teach the horse to load and unload in advance so that when you are ready to haul, they understand this important skill. When it's time to unload, untie the horse and hold him before the butt bar is unfastened, then calmly unload. Give the horse's eyes time to adapt to the sunlight after unloading. Horse's eyes take longer to adapt than ours, and this could cause them to balk or spook.

Once you have trailered to your destination, park appropriately. Know what type of surfaces your vehicle and trailer can handle. Make sure you do not block any other vehicles, trailers or throughways. Do not unhitch the trailer from the tow vehicle when tying horses to the trailer. Park with enough distance between the trailers so horses cannot interfere with each other or the vehicles. Make sure they are trained to stand tied, and if they paw, keep them away from tires. Portable panel fencing is available and often used by riders who camp or trail ride. The horse needs to have spent quiet time at home in the portable paddock as a trial run. If your vehicle and/or trailer is going to be parked away from your location, make sure both are securely locked. It is a good idea to carry a lock for your trailer tongue in case you have to unhook and leave it unattended.



### Could this happen to you?

"I was moving my horses to my new house. I had a two-horse, straight-load, tow-behind/bumper-pull trailer with a ramp. I had put the ramp down and was starting to unfasten the butt bar on my filly's side. Unfortunately, the person at the head of the trailer was inexperienced and unfastened the trailer tie without maintaining control of her head. My filly then tried to turn her head around and proceeded to get stuck and fall. I was trying to calm her with my left hand which had to go under the butt bar to do so while I attempted to unhook the butt bar with my right hand. Since I still had a horse on the other side, I did not want both of them panicking. My filly jumped up, snapping my left arm under the butt bar. I knew right way it was broken since you could see the radius bone starting to protrude."

*ADVICE: It is very important that you work with experienced individuals when loading or unloading horses. It is important to have someone control the head of the horse after he is untied. It is usually a good step to review procedures in advance with the individual helping you to make sure they know what to do.*

*Use trailer ties with safety/quick-release snaps. Be aware of your horse's likes and dislikes of other horses and load them accordingly. Most trailers have panels to keep the horses from having head contact with one another. Two horses that do not get along can make for a stressful trip for both animals. Stallions should be loaded in a "stallion" stall, which has a full panel separating them from the other horses.*



## Unloading checklist

- ☐ Examine the area for safety hazards.
- ☐ Untie the horse but control the horse's head until the butt bar is down.
- ☐ Don't stand directly behind the horse before or while he unloads.

## Could this happen to you?

"My horse decided to back off the trailer and I thought she would stop, but of course she didn't. As the lead pulled through my hand I broke three fingers and got a good rope burn."

*ADVICE: It is good practice to wear gloves when loading and unloading. In general, you should try maintaining control of your horse but when your safety becomes an issue it is usually best to let go of the horse. Regular trailer loading and unloading training of you and your horse can prove helpful.*

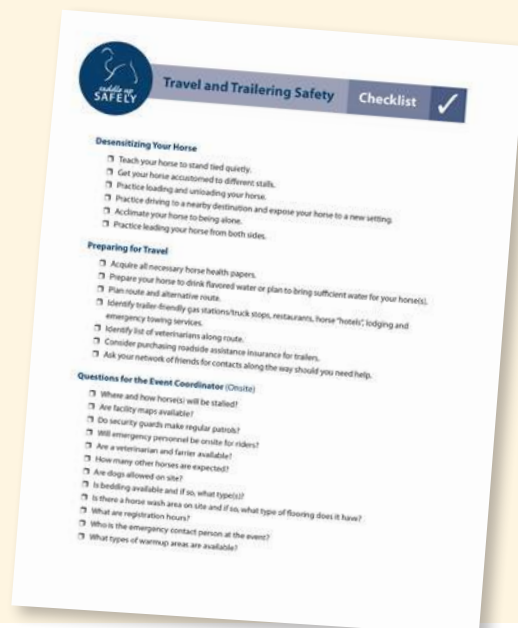


## Travel to a new environment

Most horses will trailer to new environments at some point in their lives. It is important that you take all the precautions necessary to ensure your safety, your horse's safety and the safety of others while traveling and upon arrival. See our companion booklet on *Travel to a New Environment* for a comprehensive overview of tips and checklists.



For a comprehensive checklist on safety preparation when traveling to a new environment go to [saddleupsafely.org](http://saddleupsafely.org). The checklist covers what to do before, during and after a trip with your horse.





## Equine safety resources

The best way to learn about trailer safety is by asking an experienced instructor for help or by being around other safety-conscious, experienced horsepeople. However, you can supplement your learning by visiting equine safety websites, checking national equine and medical organization websites, or by reading horseback-riding safety books. Some of these resources include:

### BOOKS

*The United States Pony Club Manual of Horsemanship Intermediate Horsemanship C-1, C-2 Level* by Susan Harding and Pony Club, 2013. This book covers travel safety and bandaging, including everything from trailer safety (multiple checklists), preparing a horse for travel, and loading and unloading, to care of horse during travel, long-distance shipping, and commercial shipping and air travel.

*The Complete Guide to Buying, Maintaining, and Servicing a Horse Trailer* by Neva Kittrell Scheve with Tom Scheve, 1998.

*Equine Emergencies on the Road* by Neva Kittrell Scheve and James Hamilton, DVM, 2013.

### EQUINE SAFETY WEBSITES

In addition, there is an increasing number of good websites that include safety material. The following websites contain specific information for traveling safety:

#### SaddleUp SAFELY

Provides general safety information, including many safety publications  
[www.saddleupsafely.org](http://www.saddleupsafely.org)

#### USRider Equestrian Motor Plan

Provides useful tips on trailering.  
[www.usrider.org/EquestrianMotorPlan.html](http://www.usrider.org/EquestrianMotorPlan.html)

Rebecca Gimenez, PhD, has a blog on TheHorse.com called Horse 911 and has covered many emergency situations horse owners may face. One of the first blog entries she did was on trailer safety:

[TheHorse.com/33984](http://TheHorse.com/33984)

Equispirit Horse Trailer website has many pages devoted to educating horse owners about horse trailer safety.

[www.equispirit.com/info/faq.htm](http://www.equispirit.com/info/faq.htm)

### ORGANIZATIONS

In addition, the following provide general horseback-riding and horse-handling safety information:

#### Equestrian Medical Safety Association

This association provides education, research and resources to protect riders and improve safety within equestrian sports.  
**866-441-2632** (toll-free)  
[www.emsaonline.net](http://www.emsaonline.net)

#### Certified Horsemanship Association

Provides basic to advanced information about safety on and around horses.  
**800-399-0138** (toll-free), **859-259-3399**  
[www.CHA-ahse.org](http://www.CHA-ahse.org)



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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“As an Olympic athlete, I take my sport seriously,  
and when it comes to safety, I take my  
equipment very seriously. I never get  
on my horse without a helmet”.

– Ann Kursinski  
*U.S. Olympic Medalist, Jumping*



## SADDLE UP SAFELY PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

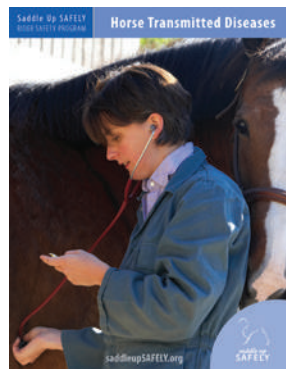
Alltech	Lexington Herald-Leader
Ariat International, Inc.	Medtronics, Inc.
Brain Injury Alliance of Kentucky	Mid-East Kentucky Quarter Horse Association
Brumfield Hay and Grain Co.	National Thoroughbred Racing Alliance
Buffalo Trace Mounted Patrol	North American Racing Academy
Cardinal Hill Rehabilitation Hospital	Northern Kentucky Horse Network LLC
Certified Horsemanship Association	Ohio Quarter Horse Association
CMD Health	Pegasus Helmets
DiscoverHorses.com	PHI Air Medical of Kentucky
Equine Guelph	Point Two Air Jackets USA
Equestrian Medical Safety Association	Red Bay Group LLC
Equine Risk Management Group	Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital
Folck Insurance	Safe Kids Fayette County
TheHorse.com	Troxel Helmets
Jockey's Guild	University of Kentucky Ag Equine Programs
Junior League of Lexington	UK College of Public Health
Keeneland	UK HealthCare
Kentucky 4-H Horse Program	UK Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation
Kentucky Department for Public Health	UK Psychiatry
Kentucky Equine Education Project	UK Spinal Cord and Brain Injury Research Center (SCoBIRC)
Kentucky Horse Council	United States Pony Clubs Inc.
Kentucky Horse Park	United States Dressage Federation
Kentucky Horseshoeing School	United States Equestrian Federation
Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center	USRider Equestrian Motor Plan
The Lane Report	Welch Printing Company

## Purpose of Saddle Up SAFELY

Saddle Up SAFELY is a coalition of 40-plus medical, public health, educational, retail and horse organizations from the United States and Canada led by the University of Kentucky's UK HealthCare and the University of Kentucky Ag Equine Programs. SUS is actively supported by the United States Pony Clubs, Certified Horsemanship Association and the Kentucky 4-H Horse Clubs. Saddle Up SAFELY's goals are to: 1) raise awareness and understanding of rider/handler safety; 2) reduce the number and severity of horse-related injuries; and 3) encourage injured riders to return to the sport safely.

## Resources available

Saddle Up SAFELY offers a number of brochures on its website at [saddleupsafely.org](http://saddleupsafely.org). In addition, you can find online safety quizzes, expert columns and a safety blog by Fernanda Camargo, DVM, PhD. You can also find us on Facebook. Perhaps the most valuable resource is the collection of more than 300 safety tips offered by our website visitors. We encourage anyone who has been injured in a horse-related incident to share their story and the advice they would give others to avoid or reduce the severity of a similar accident or injury.



Brochures available online at **SaddleUpSAFELY.org** or call **859-257-1000** or toll-free **800-333-8874**.

## How to reach us

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Phone: **859-257-1000** or toll-free **800-333-8874** / Fax: **859-257-5509**



*Information in this booklet developed by*

University of Kentucky

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UK HealthCare

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University of Kentucky  
Ag Equine Programs

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UK College of Public Health

