

## **Did You Know? Tips for Handling a Horse on Stall Rest**

By Kandi Kline

At some point, it can happen to you. An injury or illness sidelines your horse, and the vet has recommended stall rest. Your equine partner may turn out to be a good patient, but it's important to be aware of the risks involved when managing a fit athlete who is suddenly is stall-bound.

While some horses will settle easily into the rehab routine, other horses will simply go bonkers without regular exercise and turn-out. And even those who don't mind spending 24/7 in a 12'x12' box may not calmly accept necessary treatments.

Here are some tips to help keep you and your horse sane and safe during a long lay-up.

### **Stable Vices**

Your horse's basic temperament will be a big factor in successful rehabilitation. While all stall-bound horses are more prone to ulcers, colic, and developing stable vices, a high-strung worrywart will be even more predisposed to these problems.

If your high-strung Thoroughbred reverts back to his race track days and begins stall walking or weaving, this is defeating the purpose of the rest period. Depending on temperament and the length of rest prescribed, a long-term tranquilizer such as Reserpine might be recommended. Discuss this with your vet. Also, you might want to him a toy to occupy his time, such as a Jolly Ball (try [www.bitofbritain.com](http://www.bitofbritain.com), where USEA members also receive 5 percent discounts on on-line orders). If your budget conscious, you could even try hanging a milk jug or two in the stall.

In addition, keep in mind how strong the herd instinct is and try your best to stable a pal next door at all times to keep the lonesome blues at bay. If this isn't possible because your horse lives alone and you're looking at months of recovery, consider a non-equine buddy such as a (horse friendly!) goat or chicken. Sometimes even company that bleats or clucks is better than nothing.

And no matter how well you know this horse, be careful when handling him. His behavior and reactions during this time may not be typical, so be alert at all times to avoid you being the next one laid up by an injury.

### **Gastric Ulcers**

A horse that is stuck in a stall all day, every day, is much more prone to gastric ulcers than one that is turned out on grass at least part time. This is because a horse's stomach is designed to have an almost constant influx of food,

specifically grass. A stomach that is almost empty due to many hours going by between meals will accumulate gastric acids, a leading cause of stomach ulcers.

Since grass is out of the question, feed as many small meals as possible each day, with the meal consisting of mainly hay with grain kept to a minimum since too much grain, especially in a horse receiving no exercise, can cause a host of other issues such as colic or founder (see “Comfort Food” below). These frequent meals will not only help keep ulcer risk to a minimum, they will also give the horse something to occupy his time.

Another ulcer prevention option--especially in a high-strung horse or one that is depressed and unwilling to eat much--would be a medication like UlcerGard ([www.ulcergard.com](http://www.ulcergard.com)). Your vet can help you develop a plan.

### **Comfort Food**

It's important to reduce the amount of “energy” in the horse's feed program, specifically decreasing the amount of carbohydrates and protein. This means feeding as little grain as possible, and as much low-protein hay as the horse would like. The hay will alleviate boredom and also keep the gut active, hopefully reducing the chances of colic. Discuss any feed adjustments with your vet to come up with the optimum program.

### **Colic**

It is very unnatural for a horse to be standing relatively still for days on end. They are designed to move, almost constantly. Just standing around for days or weeks can slow down the digestive process, which can result in colic and impactions. This is where the ongoing supply of hay can be helpful. In addition, make sure the horse is drinking regularly by checking his water bucket levels. If you're concerned that he's not taking in enough water, try increasing his hydration with mashes.

### **Minor Details**

Other ways to keep your horse comfortable: a well-ventilated, generously bedded stall; lots of love and attention from humans, including treat sessions, grooming, and even vet-approved massages; soothing music from a radio or stereo system; a stall located where the horse can hang his head out and/or watch other horses in nearby paddocks (as long as this doesn't send him into a tizzy).

### **Getting Back to Work**

Eventually, fingers crossed, your horse will get his release papers from the vet. The oft-recommended protocol for tendon and ligament injuries includes limited, controlled exercise. Your vet can discuss with you the pros and cons of hand-grazing, turnout, hand-walking, and riding as appropriate for your specific situation. The use of tranquilizers during this period may be advised, depending again on temperament.

For your own safety, when you first start hand walking or turning the horse out, wear gloves, boots and your helmet (not a bad idea when handling any horse, but that's a topic for another article). Even the most placid horse can get a little overcome with joy when first exposed to some freedom.

### **Keeping Covered**

Major Medical/Surgical insurance coverage exists to help you with the veterinary expenses associated with a long lay-up. The sport horse authorities at [Broadstone Equine Insurance Agency](http://www.BroadstoneEquine.com), the USEA's Official Equine Insurance Provider, can match your needs with the best coverage available to see you and your horse through these times. Give them a call at 888-687-8555 or visit [www.BroadstoneEquine.com](http://www.BroadstoneEquine.com).