

Haltering and Tying Horses

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Halters are designed to help catch, hold, lead and tie horses and ponies. They are nothing else. Every horse should have his own halter correctly sized and adjusted to fit.

Halters come in many styles and in many materials of varying quality. Every horseperson should know the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds, how to adjust them and how to use them.

Types of halters

Some horses are delivered to the new owner in shipping halters.

Shipping halters are made of jute fiber (burlap), are light and usually have a string throat latch. A shipping halter is inexpensive and adequate for temporary use but is completely unsatisfactory for use as a permanent halter. It cannot be adjusted well (only the throat latch can be changed) and the fiber lacks strength and durability. The halter is also difficult to keep in place on the horse's head and is almost impossible to keep clean.

Rope halters made of braided cotton are very popular. They are strong, relatively inexpensive and readily adjustable. They are also available in a variety of sizes. Chief disadvantages of rope halters are: difficulty to keep clean, a tendency to rot and mildew if not kept dry, and the lack of durability that is found in top quality leather halters.

Another problem with rope halters is that they shrink. Rain, heavy dew or even high humidity will cause cotton rope halters to shrink. Unless care is taken to frequently readjust rope halters, the shrinking can cause severe pain and even choke the horse.

To eliminate shrinking, a new rope halter should be soaked in water for a few hours or overnight, then thoroughly dried. Clothes dryers, ovens and other sources of high heat should not be used because they tend to overshrink the halter, and heat can damage the fiber, thus weakening the halter.

The type of rope halters used with cattle should not be used with horses. Pulling on the lead rope draws down under the jaw and over the top of the head, much as a lariat rope would. Use these halters only in an emergency. Tie a knot at the point where the lead rope passes through the eye of the halter and the lead rope becomes a halter shank.

Nylon halters have all the advantages of cotton rope halters plus more. They are easily cleaned, not usually affected by dampness, not subject to rotting and mildew, and can be obtained in a variety of colors. Nylon does not shrink; instead, it tends to stretch. In some cases, nylon halters tend to slip at the adjustment points, especially at the crown and under the chin. Therefore, it is necessary to occasionally readjust nylon halters. Nylon halters are more expensive than cotton.

Nylon halters also can be obtained in a flat web design. They look like and are designed like leather halters. They are cheaper than leather, last longer and require less care. However, nylon web halters are difficult to adjust and repair. Like nylon rope, nylon webbing stretches easily. The ends of some pieces of a nylon halter that have been cut with a hot device have a sharp, abrasive edge. These may be removed by cutting with a knife or scissors.

Leather halters are available in a wide variety of types and an even wider variety of prices. Some are adjustable only at the crown piece. These usually must be buckled and unbuckled to be put on and taken off. Some halters have an adjustable chin strap to accommodate various sizes of muzzles, as well as adjustments in the crown piece to fit various lengths of heads. This type of halter is especially well adapted for use on young growing horses or where one halter is used on a number of horses.

Some halters have snaps at the cheek, so unbuckling is not needed when putting on or removing the halter. This type of halter does not work well on horses that dislike having their ears handled or tend to be head shy.

Leather halters require a great deal of care and attention to keep them in good condition. They must be cleaned regularly and inspected frequently for wear or damage. They are most easily repaired, easiest to individualize with name plates and look dressier than other types of halters. In general, they are also more expensive.

Halters of all types may be purchased in various sizes. Most manufacturers list sizes according to breed, age, type or weight. Care should be taken when buying halters to save the sales slip and insist on the right of return or exchange if the size selected is incorrect.

When buying a horse, especially your first horse, ask if a halter is included in the sale. If not, you may find yourself with a horse but no way to hold him. Therefore, for safety's sake and to avoid embarrassment, a halter of correct size should be obtained and be on hand at delivery.

Haltering

Putting a halter on a horse is easy if the horse has good manners and has been properly trained.

To halter a horse in a corral, paddock or pasture, the horse first must be caught. There is

only one substitute for training here — the lariat rope. The horse should be trained to let the horsemen approach on the horse's left side.

Carry the halter, unbuckled or unsnapped, in the left hand. The right hand can then grasp the mane at the top of the neck and behind the ears. Or the right arm may be placed under the neck with the fingers extended palm upward, palm toward the neck to grasp the mane from the horse's right side. The left hand can then slip the noseband of the halter over the nose.

At this point the right hand can grasp the crown piece and pull it in place, either pulling it back over the ears or by lifting the crown piece strap over the neck behind the ears. Buckling or snapping completes the job.

In the case of halters with snaps at the cheek, it may be easier to use the left hand to push the halter back over the ears and use the right to fold the ears forward under the crown piece.

A lead shank can also be used to catch the horse. This is accomplished by placing the lead around the neck and holding both ends as a noose, while the left hand puts the halter in place. This procedure is especially recommended on head-shy horses or ponies that resist being haltered.

Adjusting the halter

Once the halter is in place, it should be properly adjusted. This normally is simply adjusting the length of the crownpiece. This adjustment is determined by the position of the noseband. The noseband should fall about two inches below the bony point of the cheek.

If the noseband is too high, it may rub against the cheek, causing irritation and loss of hair. This will also cause the chin strap to be pulled too high under the jaw and can restrict jaw movement. If the noseband is too low, it may restrict breathing and allow the horse to rub the halter off too easily.

If the noseband and chin strap are adjustable, they should be set so two large fingers (two inches) may be placed under the noseband. It may be necessary to open, adjust the position, and re-close the clamps on rope and nylon halters to make this adjustment.

If the throat latch can be adjusted, it too should be set properly. The horse's nose should be flexed back to the chest. If there is still room in the throttle, the throat latch is correctly adjusted. This will not be a problem with most halters.

Some halters may have an adjustment on both sides of the crown piece. If so, both sides should be adjusted evenly to keep the halter balanced.

Do's and don'ts of haltering

Halters should not be left on horses that will not be watched or inspected at least daily. Young horses especially should not be turned out wearing halters. Halters may catch on fences, tree branches or brush. The young horse, unable to free himself, panics - usually with serious consequences.

A horse should not be turned out wearing a loose-fitting halter. Horses use their rear feet to scratch their heads, and loose-fitting halters are an open invitation to get a back foot caught or "hung-up."

Leather halters should be cleaned frequently with saddle soap or leather cleaner. Avoid using excess oil of any kind, even special leather oils. Too much oil makes the leather sticky, and it will stretch and lose its strength. Oil will also rot the stitching. Oiling is necessary only when neglect has allowed the halter to dry out. New halters should be softened with saddle soap only.

Leather halters should not be allowed to remain damp and to mildew. When unused, leather halters should be cleaned and stored in a dry place. Excess heat should also be avoided.

Rope and nylon halters may be cleaned with soap and water. They should be thoroughly dried. As with leather halters, rope halters not in use should be stored in dry areas.

Tying the horse

There are no "rules" for tying a horse other than those dictated by safety and common sense. Tying is only a matter of keeping a horse in one place. Most horses learn to "tie" simply because they find it easier to stand quietly than to fight. All horses should be taught to stand tied and should not be considered fully trained until they do so.

The first requirement in correctly tying a horse is using a knot that can be untied quickly, will not slip, and can be untied even though the horse may be pulling back on the tie rope. The recommended knot for tying a halter rope to a fixed object is a quick release knot.

Problem Horses. Some horses dislike being tied and are known as halter pullers. To help prevent halter pulling or to get around this problem, a lariat rope may be placed around the girth of a horse with the standing part of the rope extending forward to the halter ring from between the front legs of the horse. The end of the lariat is then tied to a fixed object. As the horse backs up, the lariat loop tightens around the horse's middle and the rope through the halter rings pulls the head down, without injuring the neck at the atlas joint. It usually takes only a few short sessions before the horse learns to stand quietly.

Another method of tying the halter puller is to use a three-fourths inch or one-inch soft

cotton or soft nylon rope. This is tied around the neck. The other end of the rope is threaded through the halter ring and fastened to something solid with a quick release knot. Although very hard pulling could injure the horse, the size of the rope will usually prevent this. This method may not stop a horse from pulling back, but it is a very effective means of keeping it tied.

Tying to post. To tie a horse to a post, stake or smooth vertical pole or tree trunk, a combination knot may be used to prevent the rope from dropping down the pole and from slipping.

A much better arrangement, and one that can be untied easily, is to wrap the lead around the post two or three times, then tie a quick release knot and draw out all the slack. This will be apt to slip down the post if not tied tightly, but it is much safer than a hitch, quick release combination.

The knots should be tied about 3-1/2 to 4 feet above the ground, with 2 or three feet of tie rope between the knot and the halter. It is important to keep the horse from dropping his head down and stepping over the rope. He must, however, be able to get his head up to its normal height.

Tying a horse to a smooth horizontal pole or to a picket line can be safely done in a manner very similar to the procedure used for a vertical pole. In this case, an additional wrap should be made in the hitch, followed by the quick release knot, to keep everything in place. Just as with the vertical post, the hitch knot may be difficult to untie when the horse pulls back too hard. Therefore, the same procedures as outlined above should be used.

Ground ties. When there are no suitable objects to which a horse can be tied, it may be possible to use a ground tie. This might be useful on trail rides, when stopping in an open park or pasture. The first step is to dig a small hole about one foot deep. Then tie a long rope such as a lariat to an object such as a large stone, a branch or even a hammer. Draw the rope tight and place the object in the hole. Carefully pack the dirt into the hole. The other end of the rope is then attached to the halter ring, with a quick release knot, or it may be placed around the horse's neck and secured with a bowline knot. Unless the horse is especially unruly, there should be no problem.

Before using the ground tie method above, or when staking a horse out where the rope will lie in similar fashion along the ground, the horse must be trained not to become entangled in the rope. The horse should allow the rope to rub against both the outside and inside of all four legs and should stand quietly if he does become entangled.

Cross tying. Cross tying not only requires special equipment, it requires special training. Most horses object at first to having their heads held immobile. To start training, allow lots of slack in both ties. Gradually shorten the ties until the desired control is obtained. It is usually advisable to allow 6 to 8 inches of play on each of the center. One way of doing this is to leave the ties long enough to overlap the length of the snaps.

Take special care to prevent a horse from breaking loose when tied. Once a horse breaks loose, either from improperly tied knots or breakage of equipment, he is very apt to try harder to break loose the next time he is tied. Halters, tie ropes and the objects to which they are to be tied should be strong and sound to minimize any chance of the horse breaking free.

Horses should be tied far enough apart so they cannot kick or bite each other. They should be separated by ropes, rails or distance. A recommended distance between strange horses when tied to a fence or along a picket line is 20 feet. At no time should they be tied closer than 10 feet apart.

Unless a horse is tied in a stall, it should not be left unobserved for long periods of time. This is particularly important with young horses. When possible, tie horses where they can watch activities around them. When tied this way, they become less bored and less easily frightened. Horses should never be tied fast with bridle reins. Bridles were not designed to act as halters. Neither were reins intended to be used as tie ropes.

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