

# Hidden Hazards

Are your fencing, stalls, and equipment accidents waiting to happen?



If there's a hole, nail, or sharp edge, your horse will find it. And I've found that almost every owner has a story to tell that proves that sentence true.

Many accidents, however, can be avoided. I work in the equine and land management field and have seen and heard much in the way of accidents—or accidents waiting to happen. With some help from other horse owners and professionals, I've put together this list of potential horse hazards to avoid. I hope they'll help you come up with ways to prevent mishaps from happening on your property.

## Exposed Edges

Janie Byam, a lifelong horse owner from Meridian, Idaho, knows the danger of exposed bottom edges of barns. "I had a young colt nearly lose his leg when the soil eroded away and exposed the bottom

metal edge of a wall," she says. "He had small enough hooves that he stepped into the exposed area, and when he pulled his foot out, the metal siding dug into his skin, slicing it off the bone."

While "Toby" survived, at age 12 he still doesn't like people touching that leg.

**Solution** If your barn or another building your horses have access to is metal, consider ways to keep horses off building walls—such as an installing an interior or exterior "fence" as a barrier. Inspect walls, edges, and corners periodically to be sure there are no exposed sharp areas.

## Unsafe Fencing

Field fencing (sometimes called live-stock fencing) has 6-by-6-inch squares that can snag hooves. Barbed wire fencing is never recommended for horses because they can get hung up in it easily, sustaining cuts and deep wounds. These

materials are especially dangerous in confinement areas where horses inevitably test and lean on fencing.

**Solution** Just about any fence can become a hazard if damaged, but choosing a material that's safe, secure, and visible can decrease the likelihood of that happening. Always place fence rails or wire mesh on the sides of the posts facing the pasture's interior—these will be less likely to come unattached or break if a horse leans on them. Plus, the horse won't be as likely to come in contact with nails or fasteners.

## Faulty Fence Chargers

Electric fencing won't do you much good if the fence chargers aren't functioning. Horses can escape from or injure themselves on the wire. At one place where she boarded, Byam says Toby would get out of his paddock and into the

adjacent alfalfa field anytime the chargers were off.

**Solution** Keep fence chargers on in paddocks with electric fencing, and always be sure they are working properly. “It is funny to watch him test it now,” Byam says of Toby. “He uses the hairs on his muzzle to sense the electricity without even touching it. I check our charger at least twice each day before going back into the house. I don’t go to bed without checking it again—I can see the fence charger light from the back window of the house.”

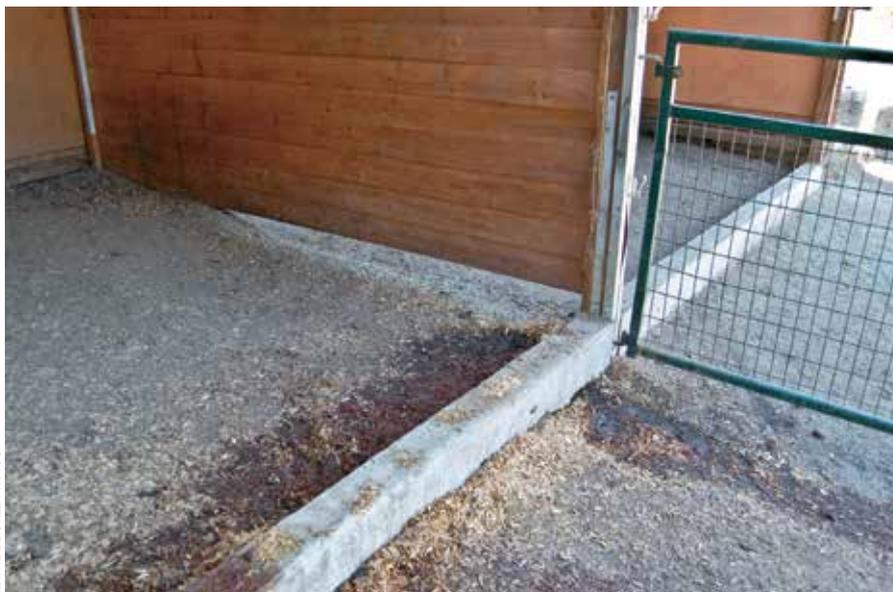
### Piercing T-Posts

When I first started in horse and land management education 20-plus years ago, an equine veterinarian told me a \$10 bag of plastic T-post caps would go a long way toward preventing many of the injuries she treated. She told me tales of frolicking baby horses impaling themselves on T-posts, as well as horses scratching their faces on fences and injuring eyes. “I had a horse swing her head down—probably to bite a fly or itch her head—and put an uncapped T-post right through her temple,” says Byam.

**Solution** Use T-post caps, plastic T-posts, fence posts with rounded tops eliminating T-posts altogether, or another type of fencing product from the many available.

### Unsecure Gates

We all know the idiom about closing the barn door after the horse has bolted. Indeed, preparation is preferable;



ALAYNE BLICKLE PHOTOS

Exposed bottom edges of stalls and other walls can ensnare hooves and limbs.

shutting a stall door or latching a gate properly can prevent you from having to chase your horse around the property, or much worse.

**Solution** Byam offers a fail-safe for this risk: “I am paranoid about gates, so most of my gates have a second line of defense in terms of double latching. In addition to the main latch, I have either a strap or a strand of hot wire across the top. This not only works as a safeguard if the first latch fails, but it also gives me two things to think about so I don’t overlook securing something. The second step makes me pay better attention.”

### Stray Splinters and Nails

Terri Herrera is an equestrian property realtor who owns a dressage facility in Redmond, Washington. She says improperly maintained stall walls can quickly

lead to large splinters or nails popping loose that can poke an eye or scrape a horse that rubs against them. “We all know that if there is a nail, just one nail somewhere in the barnyard, a horse will find it,” says Herrera.

**Solution** Check stall walls (and fencing) at home, at shows or clinics, or wherever you might travel, and fix any problems before putting your horse into the area. Carry a hammer, pliers, and duct tape in your horse trailer for just that sort of thing.

### Flimsy Stall Walls

Thin stall walls can be accidents waiting to happen. Sheri Clevenger, a horse owner from Winlock, Washington, recalls when her mare Melody kicked through a wall. “Melody bent the board enough to get her leg through it, but it then became like a can opener, and she couldn’t pull it back,” she says.

**Solution** “We had built the stall with a removable wall in case we ever needed a double stall but quickly added a center vertical support brace to prevent it from ever happening again,” Clevenger says. “We were so lucky she didn’t panic and (that she) let me help her out of what could have been a disastrous situation.”

Consider reinforcing all walls to a strength that a horse can’t kick through, with, for example, ¾-inch plywood or 2-by-6 studs.

### Snagging Halters and Muzzles

Anything left on a loose horse is a potential disaster. Halters, grazing muzzles, and cribbing straps can all catch on



Don’t place fence rails on the outside of posts—as seen here. They’re more likely to break if horses lean on them, and it’s easier for horses to get snagged on nails and fasteners.

protrusions and cause a horse to panic. I know many a horse owner whose horses' halters and fly masks have gotten hung up on things like water faucets or whose cribbing straps have gotten stuck inside haynets.

Patricia Cosgrove, an owner from Enumclaw, Washington, recalls once seeing her Shetland pony standing very still for several minutes with his head next to the back fence of the arena. "When I went out to check on him, I discovered he had inadvertently latched his grazing muzzle to the 2-by-4 wire mesh fencing—he was clipped right to the fence," she says.

**Solution** Avoid leaving anything on an unattended horse besides a flymask (which can tear more readily than other headwear). If your horse must wear a muzzle, "always turn the clips so they are on the inside, next to their head," Cosgrove says. Breakaway halters, muzzles, and clips are also smart options.

### Cluttered Pastures

Don't store or install objects or materials in turnouts. "My horse, Jax, caught his fly sheet on a sprinkler head," says Helyn Hasse of Boise, Idaho. "He got scared and actually broke the pipe in half. It could have been really ugly, but fortunately he didn't get hurt and only ruined the pipe—and fly sheet."

**Solution** Look for and remove anything stored in confinement areas or pastures with horses. Think about items such as homemade water tanks from old bathtubs or water heaters. Some of these can have very sharp edges. Either frame these tanks with 2-by-4s or invest in a quality (and safe) stock tank or muck bucket for drinking water.

Walk and inspect new pastures before turning your horse out in them. You could find anything from a kitchen sink and old tractor parts to deep holes, fallen branches, and other entrapments.

### Communal Fence Corners

Placing the water trough or a gate in a paddock corner creates a potential bottleneck and an opportunity for one horse to pin another—or a horse to rush through a gate to avoid crowding by pasturemates. I steer clear of pasture corners as much as possible; they are difficult to mow and allow horses to bully or trap one another.

**Solution** Place waterers and gates



Barbed wire, field fencing, and metal T-posts (above) are major horse pasture no-nos. Plastic T-posts and hot tape (below) with functioning fence chargers are much safer bets.



ALAYNE BLICKLE PHOTOS

mid-fenceline. When planning new fencing, round the corners of enclosures into smooth curves.

### Fire-Prone Fans and Cords

Inexpensive plastic box fans are common cooling devices in barns. However, they can also be fire hazards if they have open motors not made for running outside. Dust, hay chaff, and cobwebs can clog the motor and cause a fire. Furthermore, the extension cords used with them aren't often heavy-duty and outdoor-rated or plugged into a ground-fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) outlet.

**Solution** Consider installing industrial-grade overhead ceiling fans that have enclosed motors and are water-resistant.

For floor fans, spend the extra dollar on industrial-grade outdoor-rated fans with enclosed motors. Use only heavy-duty outdoor-rated extension cords and have outlets GFCI upgraded. Better fans and cords cost more, but avoiding a barn fire is worth the expense. Plus, better fans circulate air more effectively.

At the very least, routinely take a can of compressed air and blow out dust and cobwebs from around box fan motors. Leaf blowers also work well.

While it's preferable not to have extension cords in the barn, be sure any cords in use are not trailing here and there, draped within chewing or tripping distance of your horse.

### Hanging Buckets

The metal ends of bucket handles can scratch an eye or catch a nostril. While most 5-gallon buckets come with protective rubber tips on their handles, this material can sometimes wear out or fall off over time.

**Solution** Make sure you always buy buckets with rubber tip guards or cover exposed metal ends with duct tape. You might also consider using a larger stall waterer, such as a muck bucket that doesn't have metal parts.

### Take-Home Message

Our list of horse hazards could go on for days; pick any common object in the barn, and someone could probably tell a story about a horse who managed to get hurt on it. So take a few minutes to walk around and double-check your property for hidden hazards. It's common to not think about these risks until you're managing a horse injury because of one. 🐾