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**BLOG: HORSE SENSE (AND SENSIBILITY)**

# 20 Do's and Don'ts for Being an Awesome Veterinary Client

By [Stephanie](#) | 4 Dec 2013 | [7 Comments](#) | ★★★★★

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Not a week passes that I don't hear at least one person say "I'm having the vet out," or "the vet should be calling." It's just a fact of life with horses; there's always something to prevent, maintain, or doctor, and I'm always pleased to hear that members of my team at work, friends, and colleagues are keeping tabs on their horses' health with their practitioners' input.



Remember that your veterinarian is an integral part of your horse's health-care team.

The health of that veterinarian-client relationship is something that also requires maintenance. In the seventh grade I interviewed our family herd's veterinarian for a career project and learned that her profession was not for

Photo: Erica Larson/TheHorse.com

the faint of heart;  
veterinarians travel

hither and yon to see our horses in the most extreme of weather conditions and at times well beyond business hours. They work very hard so our animals can be healthy and sound, and many of them treat the horses as if they were their own personal horses. So what can we horse owners do to make their jobs easier and to foster that veterinarian-client relationship? I asked five veterinarians from a variety of practice backgrounds for some do's and don'ts to keep in mind, and they provided some pretty useful feedback:

1. **DO remember that your veterinarian is an integral part of your team as it pertains to your horse's health**, notes Jim Morehead, DVM, of Equine Medical Associates PSC, in Lexington, Ky.

Scott Leibsle, DVM, Dipl. ABVP, deputy state veterinarian with the Idaho State Department of Agriculture's Division of Animal Industries, agrees with Morehead, adding, "The owner and the veterinarian should function as a team with mutual respect for each other's expertise. If the owner and veterinarian can communicate, negotiate, and eventually reach a mutual consensus on a horse's treatment plan, everybody wins. However, the only one that ends up suffering when the vet and the client fail to communicate with each other and work as a team is the patient."

Racetrack practitioner Jeff Blea, DVM, of Von Bluecher, Blea, Hunkin, Inc. Equine Medicine and Surgery, in Sierra Madre, Calif., and president-elect of the AAEP, echoes their sentiments, underscoring the importance of including your veterinarian in any particular horse's health care team. In the same vein ...

2. **DO establish a solid and trusting relationship with your vet, notes a sport horse veterinarian who wishes to remain anonymous.** Keeping secrets from your vet regarding your horse's care, second opinions, successes, or failures is counter-productive when trying to get to the bottom of a problem or maintain a horse with a variety of issues. "A two-way trusting relationship will usually yield the best outcome for all," the vet notes.
3. **DO study up and ask questions.** Leibsle says he loves it when his clients have done some reading on their horses' conditions and ask good questions: "If

a client has researched in advance and is well-prepared for the appointment with their vet, to me it shows a genuine commitment to their horse's welfare.”

Further, he notes that he has no problem with clients questioning his recommendations. “The more information a vet can utilize when considering treatment options for a patient, the better off the patient will be.” On the other hand ...

4. **DON'T trust everything you read on the Internet**, notes the anonymous veterinarian. And while I'm obviously biased, I'll add a little reminder here that stories you find on TheHorse.com have been vetted prior to publication. Still, if you have questions, take the stories to your appointments and ask your veterinarian about what you're learning.
5. **DO periodically thank your veterinarian**. “Everyone likes to be appreciated and everyone tries harder when they know they are,” says Morehead.
6. **DO communicate financial constraints or concerns up front**. As the unnamed practitioner observes, “Vets are expected to always know exactly how far to pursue a diagnosis or therapy plan, but this may vary highly from one client to the next.”
7. **DO follow instructions you are given regarding follow-up care**. In a nutshell, compliance usually means a better outcome for the case.
8. **DO make any complaints known to your veterinarian**. Like most individuals, vets cannot read minds, and passive aggression does not help. Give your veterinarian the chance to work through a conflict with you—be authentic in your communications.
9. **DO show loyalty to your veterinarian**. This can mean loyalty with your business and loyalty to them figuratively when they're not around. In every industry or circle there's some trash-talking—the horse industry included. Take the high road and leave your veterinarian out of it, whether in person or online.
10. **DO have your horses caught and ready to be examined at your scheduled appointment time**. “To me, it shows disrespect to the veterinarian and minimizes the value of their time to expect the vet to arrive at the farm and then have to wait for the client to catch their horses,” says Leibsl. “When I show up to the farm, I'm fully prepared to examine a patient, without

delay, and I expect the same of each of the clients.”

(To the few who will tattle here on their habitually late veterinarians or no-shows, whether in jest or not so much in jest, see numbers 2, 8, and 9. And maybe even [this post](#) on our Horses & The Law blog.)

11. **DO ask your veterinarian to complete a full oral examination on your horse once a year.** Current AAEP president Ann Dwyer, DVM, a partner at Genesee Valley Equine Clinic, in Scottsville, N.Y., says, “This will require a speculum and sedation. Your veterinarian will explain the care needed to treat any findings, and follow up the exam with proper treatment. Treatment will vary based on the age of your horse, history of any problems like poor chewing or choke, and the alignment, wear and condition of the teeth.”
12. **DO schedule an annual overall checkup once a year.** Dwyer explains that the exam can reveal to owners if their horses are “too fat or too skinny,” and it allows screening for problems such as heart murmurs, joint swellings, skin growths, and cataracts.
13. **DO make sure your veterinarian has a clean, well lit place to work on your horse,** especially if your horse is dark-on-dark! Dwyer adds, “It is best if the area can be blocked from wind, and is not in the ‘traffic path’ of other horses, farm equipment, or stable pets.”

And I’m not sure if I’ve ever even thought of this before, but beyond the potential distractions they produce, stable pets could transport pathogens around during or after a procedure. Imagine what might happen if Fido were to get into that little pile of soiled gauze pads from cleaning up the possible-strangles-case, scattering them all around the farm? It’s enough to make my head spin. But I digress.

14. **DO give any answering service or other message relay provider complete information in an emergency.** That means your name, phone number, and address (in the case of a relief/substitute veterinarian). It all goes back to good communication.
15. **DO stay close to your cell phone (with the ringer turned on) after leaving a message/asking for a return call, and stay off the phone till you get a call back (or use call waiting).** Dwyer notes, “We find that up to

25% of the time when we call someone back after an emergency page, either they have their phone turned off or they are talking to someone else and unavailable.” File the next one under common courtesy, but ...

16. **DON'T answer your cell phone or text while you are holding your horse or talking to your veterinarian.** “Most vets prefer that client cell phones are turned off so that the dialogue they have with you is not interrupted,” says Dwyer.

The way I look at it, if you wouldn't do it during a first-date dinner or a job interview, don't do it during your veterinarian appointment. You'll be able to soak in all of the information and instructions and (bonus!) be safe in the process. (At least during a date or a job interview, you're generally not in danger of having a 1,200-pound animal landing on you because of your inattention.) Also along the lines of safety ...

17. **DON'T arrive at a veterinary appointment in sandals or flip flops,** says Dr. Dwyer, noting “This happens a lot in the summer time and makes every veterinarian cringe.”

There's an image that's made its rounds on Facebook and will forever be etched on my brain: A horse inadvertently stepped on someone's flip-flop-wearing foot, and the damage was pretty heinous. I've seen the damage Warmbloods with good aim have caused my feet when I was wearing boots—that's enough for me to pull on the socks and paddock boots each time I head out to the barn.

18. **DON'T call your veterinarian and request medication that requires a prescription if he/she has not examined your horse and made a diagnosis.** Dwyer reminds us that state pharmacy laws and good veterinary medical ethics require that practitioners prescribe medication only after completing proper examinations and making diagnoses. And speaking of ethics ...

19. **“DON'T ask the veterinarian to perform an unethical procedure to a horse for financial or personal gain,”** notes Blea.

Finally, our AAEP president reminds us of a very important tip:

20. **DON'T wait to contact your veterinarian if you think you have an emergency.** “Even if the situation is one that is best monitored for a while before scheduling a visit, your vet will appreciate just knowing that there is a problem ongoing,” she says. “Sometimes the vet might even be close to you geographically but be about to drive far away. If the situation is semi-urgent, it will be valuable to discuss logistics and triage.”

**So, tell me, how have you been an awesome veterinary client?**



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04 Dec 2013 3:16 PM

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If possible I have my horse's current temperature, breathing pattern and overall demeanor observed to share with my vet when I make the call. I also take note of any changes to his food or supplements in the case that it may play a part in the issue for which I need the vet for.

### **garden55**

04 Dec 2013 5:05 PM

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I, too, take my horse's heart rate, respiration, temperature, and capillary refill before making the call. I check his feed, water, and manure every time I enter his pen just from habit and will mention if anything has changed.

I live a long way from the closest vet. I usually don't self-medicate before contacting the vet's office, but I will ask if they would like me to administer anything before the vet arrives. If, for any reason, I did give something before calling, I mention what it was, when it was given, and the dose.

Most importantly, I pay my vet bills as soon as I receive them.

### **Elissa**

04 Dec 2013 8:45 PM

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05 Dec 2013 12:35 AM

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I'm pretty sure I'm a good veterinary client...my equine veterinarian works in a clinic that is off the hook! They are all awesome & I post on my FB about them constantly! The circumstances of meeting my vet were horrific, but she brought my horse (& me) through with flying colors. I bought a special card & put a very heartfelt message to the entire staff! I love Sweet River Equine in Waterford, CA...Dr. Margaux Buchanan you know how we feel about you!!! <3

### **Kim**

05 Dec 2013 2:00 AM

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At my barn we try to get our horses on the same vaccine & annual check up schedule so our vet doesn't have to make so many barn calls to the same place.

## Wendy

05 Dec 2013 3:11 AM

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05 Dec 2013 7:12 AM

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## About Stephanie

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Stephanie L. Church, Editor-in-Chief of The Horse, received a B.A. in Journalism and Equestrian Studies from Averett College in Danville, Va., and has worked in five positions at the magazine since 1999. Her equine background is in eventing, and she enjoys photography, cooking, cycling, swimming, and traveling in her free time.

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