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Breaking in horses on farms

This fact sheet has some simple tips for keeping yourself and others safe when breaking in horses on farms.

Introduction

This factsheet is for people who 'break in' horses on farms, or for farm work. Breaking in a horse, or bringing a horse under saddle, is the process of training them to be ridden. It involves getting them used to:

- wearing tack (such as a bridle and saddle)
- carrying a rider on their back, and
- following instructions given by the rider.

Horses can become agitated when they feel threatened or frightened. Breaking in a horse involves working with a young animal who may be more likely to take fright and act unpredictably. A frightened horse will try to run away from whatever is scaring it. If it cannot move away from the 'danger' it may kick, bite, or trample as it tries to escape.

Injuries from horse handling

There are several ways people can be injured while working with horses. Falls are a common source of injury, but serious injuries and even death can occur when a rider is not mounted.

Injuries caused by horses can include:

- broken bones
- spinal injuries
- internal bleeding
- serious head injuries.

It is important to always wear a helmet when you are breaking in a horse – even when you are not mounted.

Health and safety requirements under HSWA

The Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 (HSWA) sets out the principles, duties, and obligations regarding health and safety in the workplace.

Person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU)

If you are self-employed and breaking in a horse for yourself or someone else, you may be a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU). If this is the case you have a duty under HSWA to keep yourself, your workers, and others safe. For more information, or to check if you are a PCBU, see the WorkSafe New Zealand guideline [Who or What is a PCBU?](#)

If you are a PCBU you must:

- ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that no-one's health and safety is put at risk by your work
- provide and maintain a safe work environment, including safe plant and structures, and safe systems of work
- provide the information, training, instruction, and supervision that is needed to protect everyone in the workspace
- provide any PPE (personal protective equipment) that is required for safe work.

Working with other PCBUs

If two or more PCBUs are working together they must, as far as is reasonably practicable, consult, cooperate, and coordinate their duties under HSWA. See WorkSafe's [Understanding overlapping duties](#) for more information.

Worker

If you are not self-employed and are breaking in a horse as part of your work duties, you will also have health and safety duties under HSWA as a worker. For more information about what these duties are, see our quick reference guide [Health and safety at work](#)

If you are a worker, you must:

- make sure your actions don't harm yourself or others
- cooperate with any reasonable instructions given by the PCBU that you are working with.

Other

If it is not part of your work or work duties to break in the horse you may not have duties under HSWA. However, you should consider following the safety guidelines in this factsheet to ensure the safety of yourself, the horse, and any other people who may be nearby.

Breaking in horses - what does good practice look like?

Under HSWA a PCBU must try to eliminate risk. Where this isn't possible, they must take reasonably practicable steps to minimise any remaining risks.

Here are some ways you could minimise risk when breaking in or educating a horse.

The environment

- Ensure the enclosure used for training is free from hazards and obstructions.
- Try to eliminate as many distractions as possible before you begin. These include other people, vehicles, and even other animals.
- Be aware of potential changes in the environment and how these may affect the horse.

The equipment

- Inspect all equipment for damage or wear before use. This includes all PPE.
- PPE should be worn by everyone working with the horse.
- A properly fitted helmet is essential and should be worn at all times. Helmets must adhere to current safety standards.
- Footwear should be suitable and durable. A reinforced toe is ideal.

The horse

- Pay close attention to the horse's body language and facial expressions. Watch for signs of unease.
- Reassure the horse when they become agitated.
- Stay within the horse's field of vision where possible.
- When moving through the horse's blind spot, keep a hand on the horse and talk to them so they can track you as you move.
- Stop the session if the horse shows signs of continuing stress or tension.

The trainer

- Make sure only well-trained, experienced riders or trainers break in the horse.
- Proceed slowly and be aware of and responsive to the horse's cues. Use calm, deliberate movements.
- Never attempt to break in a horse if you are under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Make sure you are well rested and alert before you begin. Fatigue can also affect your ability to work safely.