



# Road Safety Handbook for Equestrians



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# INTRODUCTION



As many equestrians take to the roads, keeping themselves and their horses safe while sharing road space with cars, trucks, motorcycles and bicycles is a key concern for many horseback riders.

Increasing development and traffic volume in rural areas have made road riding a necessity for some riders. For others, road riding is their only option to combat the repetitive nature of arena riding. It is vital that riders seek proper training for themselves and their horses to help them cope with traffic and be safe on the road.

The average motorist is not familiar with horses and may be unaware that horses can become easily startled, posing a danger to both rider and motorist alike. They may not know that it is imperative to pass horses slowly and give them a wide berth.

This handbook focuses on what you, the rider, can do to increase your safety while road riding, and includes tips for the motorist to learn how to exercise appropriate caution.

## **B.C. Motor Vehicle Act**

***Here's what the Motor Vehicle Act has to say about equestrian traffic:***

### **Part 3, section 119, paragraph (1)**

*“traffic” includes pedestrians, ridden or herded animals, vehicles, cycles and other conveyances, either singly or together, while using a highway to travel”*

### **Part 3, section 120, paragraph (1), sub-paragraph (c)**

*“a person riding an animal or driving an animal driven vehicle on a highway has the rights and is subject to the duties of the driver of a vehicle under this Part”*



### ***Road or shoulder?***

Note that when riding on the shoulder of a roadway, a rider is signalling to motorists that they are yielding the road (i.e. when a motorist pulls their vehicle over to the right, it means that the other traffic may pass). However if a rider is having difficulty or is unsure of their horse, as with an inexperienced horse, legally they may remain in the roadway indicating their possession of the right-of-way in the right-hand lane, thus encouraging vehicles to pass in the left hand traffic lane when safe to do so. If riding on the shoulder, stay as far off the roadway as possible.

## From the ICBC Road Sense Manual:



### Horses

Horses may be ridden on most public roads.

#### see

**Scan ahead** — look for horses and riders.

#### think

**Know the rules** — horse riders and horse carriage operators have the same rights as motor vehicle operators and must obey the same rules.

**Know the hazards** — horses can be startled by sudden movement or noise. The rider may not be able to control the horse.

#### do

##### Space margins

**Slow down** — go slowly when approaching a horse and rider or horse and carriage. Allow plenty of following distance.

**Allow space when passing** — leave extra room when passing them.

**Pass carefully** — horses may be startled by sudden movement or noise. Avoid sounding your horn, and pass carefully and slowly.

**Prepare to stop** — if a rider is having trouble controlling their horse, stop. It's better to wait until the horse is back under the rider's control than to risk passing them.



# Fact vs. Fiction

**“Horses have the right-of-way over cars.”**

**FALSE!**

The law that stated such has long since been repealed. In B.C., anyone who uses a public road is considered a “road user”, so the days of ultimate right-of-way are gone!



**“I have every bit as much right to be on that road as those cars do!”**

**TRUE,**

but every road user has a specific set of responsibilities to ensure their own safety and that of other road users. Being able to properly control their horse is the principal responsibility of every rider.



**“Horses cannot be controlled as well as cars can, so cars should be made to yield to horses”**

**RESPONSIBILITY LIES WITH BOTH RIDER & MOTORIST!**

Riders have every bit as much responsibility to control their horses as drivers are required to control their vehicles. Good manners and manageability under saddle are imperative for any horse, but those lessons become critical whenever we expose our equine friends to greater risks such as those likely to be encountered on the road.

# Steps to Road Riding Safety

**Be Safe,**

**Be Seen,**

**Be Aware!**

## **Be Safe**

Before venturing out, ask yourself “Am I ready?” Are you a competent rider, confident and **capable of controlling your horse** if there’s a problem on the road?



Is your horse reliable and road ready? Has your horse been desensitized to the noise and movement of traffic? If not, **invest in your horse’s training**: find the time, trainer, or clinic to help prepare you both for road readiness. Knowing how to control a horse when it is upset is critical to safety.

**Warm up!** Longe or ride your horse at home or in a safe area at walk, trot and lope before heading out on the road. Let him release his pent up energy in a safe, non-spooky way.

Select the **safest route**. Some roads can be dangerous to ride on due to shoulder width, traffic speed, or amount of traffic. Make sure to choose the route with the widest shoulder, the lowest speed limit, and the least amount of traffic as possible.

Ride single file and **obey all traffic signs** and signals – remember, your horse is legally considered a vehicle! Ride on the right hand side of the road (with traffic) and yield to pedestrians. Keep one horse length between you and the horse in front.

Don't take a young inexperienced horse out without an experienced horse/rider. If riding in a group, let the most visible and **experienced person ride closest to approaching traffic.**

When **crossing a roadway**, select a safe spot to cross. View every bend in the road, intersection, crest of a hill, or construction zone as a hazard. Choose roads with a wide shoulder or other avenues for escape if the need arises. Choose an area to cross where approaching cars are easily seen and heard. Dismount and **lead your horse** if you are unsure of your safety in the saddle.

## **Be Seen**



Highly visible clothing for the rider is a must when road riding: bright colors during the day, a **reflective vest** if possible, and definitely a reflective vest at dusk and dawn. Reflective leg wraps, brow bands, breast collars and stirrup bars make your horse visible from all sides. Another great visibility aid if you're caught out after dark is a flashing LED safety light that may be attached to your saddle or clothing. These lights were designed for cyclists, but also work great for riders. The intermittent flash of the light attracts a driver's attention making you more visible

*Photo courtesy HorseData*

## **Be Aware**

Horses can be unpredictable: by nature they are flight animals. A horse may spook and bolt with no warning, so before you hit the road, be sure you **know and trust your horse**. A nervous or fresh horse may be more difficult to handle away from familiar surroundings. **Keep light rein contact** at all times: you will be ready to respond to emergencies, and your horse will gain confidence from your guidance.



Be aware of road surface dangers. Asphalt **roads can be slippery** especially when wet. Gravel roads with large stones can cause pain for tender footed horses, making them anxious or unwilling to go forward, and loose gravel may cause your horse's hooves to slip and your horse to stumble. Riding on differing road surfaces may require special considerations for shoeing.

Watch for broken glass along the road, culvert pipes and ditches that may be hidden by tall grass, or soft shoulder areas that may be unsafe for a horse to walk on.

**Unfamiliar objects** like shiny aluminum cans or blowing plastic bags can frighten a horse enough to cause it to shy into the road. Be ready for a spook, but **don't be nervous**, as your nervousness will be transmitted to your horse.

**Watch for animals** along the route: barking dogs that may suddenly dart out, cows, pigs, llamas or other farms animals that your horse isn't accustomed to. Even another horse behind a fence, especially one that is running, can **frighten your horse**.

Loose dogs will often chase horses. **Walk - never run** - past a yard with a loose dog. Your best strategy is to turn your horse to face them and firmly tell the dog to "stay" or "go home." Glance back to see if the dog is safely staying in the yard, but looking back too often may encourage the dog to follow.

It's important to be aware that **people can be unpredictable**; no matter how educated, there will always be individuals who act irresponsibly. Uneducated motorists may pass too closely, so riders have to be prepared for those drivers who truly don't know any better.

Cyclists can be particularly frightening because **bicycles approach silently** and the riders are often hunched over the handlebars, appearing to the horse as a predator like a mountain lion or wolf might do. If you are aware of a cyclist approaching, **ask them to speak** to you. Hearing the human voice from the "predator" will help ease your horse's fear.



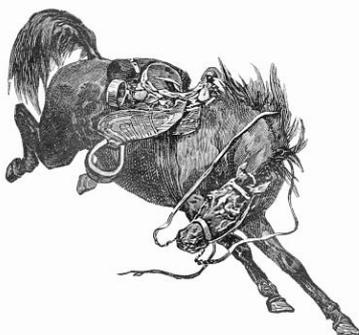
If you tense up when a vehicle passes, **your nervousness may be transmitted to your horse**: relax, stay calm, cool and centered for your horse's benefit. If you can get off the road into a driveway or farther onto the shoulder when a vehicle goes by, do so. There is no shame in ducking into a driveway long enough to let that gravel truck speed past.

Learn to recognize your horse's pre-spook signs. Before a spook, often a horse's ears will prick sharply forward, its head will go up, and its neck will tense. It may snort or blow, or start to breathe faster, or it may hesitate, start to veer away, or try to turn around. This is the time to stop and **take control of your horse before it spooks**, bolts or tries to run away.

If you feel unsafe in the saddle, dismount and hand walk your horse. Most experienced riders will agree that when your horse is frightened, you are **usually safer in the saddle** than on the ground. If you're on the ground, a frightened horse might jump right into you, stepping on you or knocking you down. But if you are nervous in the saddle, your own nervousness may frighten your horse even more, so in that case it **may be safer to hand walk your horse** until you reach a point where you feel safe to remount. Whenever safe, lead your horse so it is on your side farthest away from traffic. This at least allows you to push your horse's hind- or forequarters out of the way should it start to spin.

**If you encounter a situation where your horse is frightened and difficult to control, try to remember the following:**

**Stay calm:** Panicking, yelling, or running will only serve to elevate your horse's anxiety; chances are, if you are stressed, this will be picked up by your horse. **Take a deep breath** and let it out slowly so your horse can feel you relax.



**Let your horse move its feet:** A horse's **natural instinct** when frightened is to flee. It will help to relieve its anxiety if you let it move its feet, either by turning it in small circles if there is room, or asking it to move its hindquarters over one way and then another, back up, or step forward when safe. Training your horse to step over with its hind feet (disengaging the hindquarters) on cue is crucial to trail and road safety – being able to **disengage the hindquarters** of your horse is like knowing how to take your car out of drive.

**Let your horse check out the threat on his own time:** If your horse is frightened of something that is in reality non-threatening, like a mailbox or a culvert, the first choice is to allow your horse to see that what is scaring it poses no real threat. **Turn to face it**, and let your horse step forward and investigate on its own time, urging it forward gently one step at a time, or not at all. Allowing it to face scary objects and overcome its fear is **how to build confidence** in your horse for the future.

If it's not a safe place to let your horse face the scary object, move calmly as far away from the threat as you safely can. In an emergency, take to the ditch to get out of the way of a potentially dangerous driver – better to get dirty than be hurt!

**Never RUN from a dangerous situation: Running releases adrenalin** which in turn causes your horse to become even more excited; turn and face what is frightening your horse, allowing it to move its feet if it needs to, or move away as calmly and slowly as possible.

**If you encounter a motorist who poses a danger to horse & rider:**

It's tough to think about license plate numbers and descriptions when someone's trying to run you off the road, so too few people report those near misses and dangerous situations to the police. The more we report, the more aware the authorities will be that a problem exists.

**In case of emergency:** If you carry a **cell phone, keep it in your pocket**, not on your saddle. Make sure you have identification, a hoof pick, and a pocket knife with you. Tell someone where you will be riding and when you expect to return, and whenever possible, **ride with a buddy**.

# Liability

If you cause an accident **you can be liable**, so take all the right precautions. Respect the laws, obey signage, ensure that you and your horse are highly visible, and be sure that your horse has had sufficient training to ensure readiness for the different sights and sounds of riding on the roads.

**Get insurance.** Horse Council BC offers third-party liability insurance as part of their membership; this covers members in cases where a lawsuit is brought against an individual for damages that may be caused by a horse that they are in ownership or use of. Don't leave yourself unprotected!

# Hand Signals

Your horse is considered a vehicle. As a rider, you must therefore **follow the basic laws** of the road, including yielding, stopping at stop signs, and signalling for turns and stops. The same hand signals used by cyclists are used by equestrians. Hand signals are a means of informing other road users, whether motorists, cyclists, or pedestrians, of the rider's intent to turn right, left, or stop.

Although motorists with left hand drive vehicles are required to use their left arms to signal, cyclists and equestrians may extend either arm straight from their shoulder and **point in the direction of their turn** i.e. point right with right arm outstretched to turn right, and point left with left arm outstretched to turn left. Traditional signals with the left arm are shown below.

**Note for motorists:** In spite of hand signals, motorists should always be aware that horses are unpredictable. In fact, a rider on a young or frightened horse may have their hands too full keeping the animal under control to be able to signal.



Left hand signalling right turn



Left hand signalling left turn

The signal pictured below indicates your intent to slow down or stop, seen from the front and back.



## ***Additional hand signals often used***

**A friendly wave** is a courtesy gesture that generally is and should be extended to motorists when they pass safely, exercising caution; if your hands are not free then a friendly smile or nod is the least a motorist should expect. When motorists are displaying apparent dangerous behaviour and not exercising caution, please refrain from rude gestures or shouting; they are displays of poor etiquette and can lead to an altercation between rider and motorist. Shouting may also startle the horse(s) or cause them to think that they've done something wrong. Regardless of the motorist's actions, please stay calm!

**Slow down:** This signal is that of an open hand (palm out), arm extended, gesturing with a slow pumping action. This signal is often used to advise motorists that they need to slow down when approaching and attempting to pass the horse/rider.



**Caution:** Don't overuse the slow down signal. If a motorist is already slowing down, a thank you wave is the best way to encourage and reward their courtesy. Use the slow down signal only if someone is approaching too fast, or if a horse is acting up.

**Stop:** Arm straight out, open palm extended as if you were pressing against a wall; this gesture is very obvious and is sure to get the attention of the motorist quickly.



# Tips for the Ride



## ***Crossing the Road Safely***

**Approach the road single file with the most experienced rider/horse in the lead.**

**Stop.....before crossing the road**, get your horse's focus and full attention before asking it to cross. Be aware of everything going on around you. Wait for a long break in traffic, or for the traffic to be stopped before you cross. However, remember that a horse's instinct when anxious is to move. It may be necessary for you to let your horse walk in small circles to help it become calm, or to ask it to move its feet a little, forward-back-sideways, to take its mind off what it is anxious about. If you are riding in a group, wait until everyone is ready and then **cross as a unit**.

**Look..... both directions** for oncoming traffic. Check in front to what's ahead and behind for any potential hazards. Look at the road surface to assess its footing. Mail boxes, flags, or garbage tossed into the ditch could startle your horse. Evaluate what you see to determine if this is a **good location for you to cross**.

**Listen.....for approaching cars.** Engine sounds give you clues as to what type of vehicles are approaching and the speeds they are travelling. **Pay attention** to where your horse is listening; they use their ears to focus on sounds and may hear something before you do. Don't ride in poor light especially without reflective gear.



**Step 1** – Signal, and look before turning!



**Step 2** – cross, either in single file or abreast, but staying as close together as is safe

**Step 3** – maintain safe crossing formation



**Step 4** – When crossing complete, riders resume correct formation with one horse length of space between each horse



## More Tips for the Rider

**Training** – All riders need to ensure that their horse has been **exposed to a variety of obstacles** and sounds, has good manners, and is easily controlled under saddle before venturing out.



**Supervision** – Young, inexperienced riders should **always be accompanied by adult**, experienced riders when riding on or near the road.

**Helmets** – Whether you ride in an English or a Western saddle, a **protective helmet that fits properly** should be worn when riding horses on the road. It is the responsibility of the parent, guardian or horse owner to ensure that a child is wearing an approved, snug fitting helmet. There are many styles and sizes available for children and adults alike.

**Footwear** – Ensure that you wear appropriate footwear: a boot or shoe with a pronounced heel that will not slip easily through the stirrup to help prevent a foot being hung up in the stirrup (with the **potential for being dragged** by a frightened horse). Stirrups should be approximately 1” wider than the boot or shoe to allow the foot to slide out of the stirrup quickly and easily in an emergency, but not so wide that the foot can slip through and become caught.

**Be Conspicuous** – Don't ride on the road in poor visibility conditions or at nightfall if you can help it. All riders should wear some form of high visibility garments when riding on the road; if there is potential to be caught out after dark, ensure that you have packed an appropriate light.



## **Do!**

**Do respect private property** and “No Trespassing” signs.



**Do leave gates the way you found them:** leave them open if they're open, close them behind you if you have to open them to pass through.



## ***Don't!***

**Don't ride double** (two on a horse) or carry something that will affect your balance, or that will **interfere** with your handling of the reins.

**Don't ride bareback:** make sure you have full tack in good condition and that bridles, reins and cinches (or girths) are properly and **securely fastened**.

**Don't pony another horse** from the back of your horse unless you are an **experienced rider on an experienced horse**.

**Don't ride in a dangerous manner** without due care and attention to other road users.

# Safety is a shared responsibility

Riders, motorists, pedestrians and cyclists have a responsibility to understand each other's needs. Pass along this information to any non-riders who are interested in knowing how to share the road safely with horses.

## **For Motorists**

**Here's what the Motor Vehicle Act has to say about equestrian traffic:**

**Part 3, section 119, paragraph (1):** *“traffic” includes pedestrians, ridden or herded animals, vehicles, cycles and other conveyances, either singly or together, while using a highway to travel”*

**Part 3, section 120, paragraph (1), sub-paragraph (c):** *“a person riding an animal or driving an animal on a highway has the rights and is subject to the duties of the driver of a vehicle...”*



**You should know that:**

Horses are large powerful animals that often weigh over 1000 pounds so **a collision with one poses considerable risk** to the motor vehicle and its occupants, as well as to the horse and rider.

This vehicle hit a horse.  
*Photo courtesy car-accidents.com*

Drivers should **watch out for horses on the road**, especially on rural roads or in equestrian communities where you see a sign like this:



**Slow down when approaching** a horse and drive past slowly. **Pass wide!** If safe to do so, pass using the left traffic lane, or part of it, to ensure a wide enough berth.

Horses are unpredictable and can be frightened easily, so **be prepared to stop quickly** if necessary. Be aware that riders are often children, and therefore less experienced as both road users and horse riders. Horses themselves may be inexperienced and nervous of traffic.



**Loud or sudden noises can frighten horses:** Don't yell or honk, and if you have a loud radio (boom box), please turn it down.

Be aware that sometimes riders must ride in double file because the horse nearest the shoulder is nervous on the road and needs the security of a steadier horse between it and traffic, or **the rider may be a child** or novice who needs escorting.

Never brake or accelerate suddenly, both of which cause noise and may throw up gravel. Never throw things out your window at them, and if driving a particularly noisy vehicle, a motorcycle or pulling a trailer, please **exercise extra caution**. Please be aware that horses are animals and not machines; **they will react!** When you are well past the horse, accelerate gradually and be on your way.

## ***Please Exercise Caution!***

Horse/vehicle accidents kill or seriously injure riders **and** motorists – Let's all be safe!

When passing a horse and rider on the road, **please exercise more caution** than you would when passing a pedestrian or cyclist. Due to a horse's unpredictable nature, they must be given additional distance and

attention when passing. Collisions between a horse and car often result in major damage to the car and **can result in injury and death to the driver** as well as the rider and the horse.

Drivers should **never sound their horns or rev their engines** near horses! If the horse appears particularly nervous, **stop and wait** for the rider to either enter a driveway or wave you by. It is better to wait until the horse is back under the rider's control than to risk passing them.



## ***Please Slow Down!***

Horses have the right to use public roads, and motorists have a legal obligation to “slow down”. It is reckless driving to operate a motor vehicle without due caution and regard for the safety of others.

- Obey the speed limit
- Pay attention to the horse and slow down while it’s still well ahead of you



Motorists should understand the needs and vulnerability of riders and horses and behave courteously towards them at all times. By learning how to share the road, riders and motorists can work together to prevent tragedies.

### ***For Motorcyclists***

**Slow down and pass wide!** Please don't rev your engines.

### ***For Cyclists and Pedestrians***

**Speak up!** Give verbal warning when approaching a horse and be prepared to stop if a rider asks. For your safety and theirs, please pass single file and to the outside. **Never pass between two horses.**

### ***For Dog owners***

A horse may perceive a loose or running dog as a predator or a threat. If the horse spooks or bolts, it can injure itself or its rider. In addition, **a horse can seriously injure or kill a dog** with a lightning fast kick or strike. For your dog's sake, as well as your own protection, if you see a horse approaching, please **ensure that your dog is on a leash.**



**Horse Council BC** is a member service organization committed to working together on behalf of the equine interests of our members. Representing horse enthusiasts in BC, we collaborate with individuals, businesses, industry professionals, and government to strengthen communication, education, and safety. We strive to preserve and enhance equestrian use of public lands and to promote and foster participation in all varieties of equine activity.

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# Pre-ride Check Lists

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## RIDE

- Time & safe meeting place arranged
- Safe route planned
- Insurance carried by all riders
- Emergency Contact (who knows where we are and when we'll be back)
- Review hand signals & rules of the road
- Are riders all road ready?
- Are horses all road ready?
- If green riders or horses, is there an experienced adult on the ride?
- Check horses' feet for loose shoes, stones, or possible lameness

## EQUIPMENT

### Tack check:

- Bridle/headstall in good repair and well fastened
- Reins in good repair and well fastened
- Saddle in good repair
- Girth or cinch: in good repair & properly tightened  
(check before mounting & again during ride)
- Halter & lead rope, if required
- Stirrups of correct size: approx. 1" larger than boot or shoe
- Crop or whip, **only** if both horse & rider are trained in its use

### Clothing check:

- Helmet, proper fit and securely fastened
- Light colored clothing for visibility
- Boots or shoes with good heel that fit well in stirrups
- Reflective vest or armbands, especially if a chance of being out in dark
- Gloves
- Spurs, **only** if both horse & rider are trained in their use
- Hoof pick
- Pocket knife
- Flashlight, if a chance of being out in the dark
- Field first aid kit
- Cell phone
- Identification & emergency contact information
- Water
- Insect repellent

*Copies available at [www.hcbc.ca](http://www.hcbc.ca)*



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