

MU Guide

Haltering and Tying Horses

Wayne Loch, Department of Animal Sciences

Halters are designed to help catch, hold, lead and tie horses and ponies. They are nothing else. Every horse should have its own halter correctly sized and adjusted to fit (Figure 1).

Halters come in many styles and in many materials of varying quality. Every person who handles horses 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 material are popular. They are strong, relatively inexpensive and readily adjustable. They are also available in a variety of sizes.

A problem with cotton 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. Most of today's rope halters are made of braided synthetic fibers that do not shrink.

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 are the most widely used today. They have all the advantages of cotton rope halters plus more.



Figure 1. Halters are designed only to help catch, hold, lead and tie horses and ponies.

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 usually made in a flat web design. They are designed like leather halters. They are cheaper than leather, last longer and require less care. Nylon halters can be purchased with many options such as adjustable chin straps and rolled throat latches (Figure 2). 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 are available in a wide variety of types and an even wider variety of prices. Some are

adjustable only at the crown piece. 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.

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 it. 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. The horse should be trained to let a person approach on the horse's left side.

Carry the halter, unbuckled or unsnapped, in the left hand. A lead shank can 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 for head-shy horses or ponies that resist being haltered. 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 put it in place by lifting the crown piece strap over the neck behind the ears. Buckling 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.

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 (Figure 3).

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

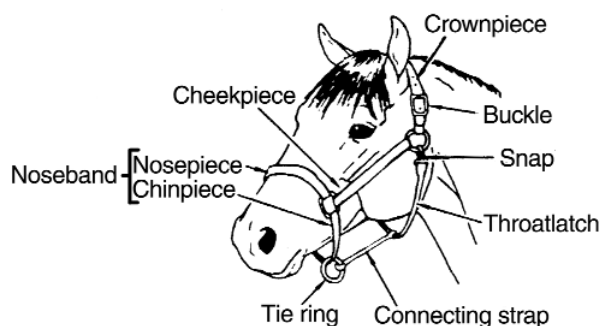


Figure 2. Halter parts and terminology.

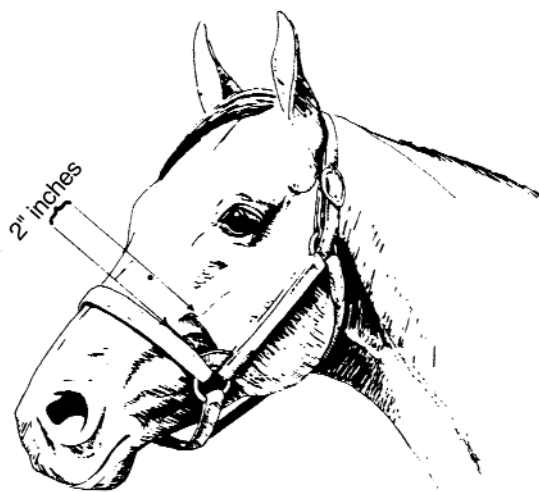


Figure 3. A correctly adjusted halter fits snugly with the noseband 2 inches below the bony point of the horse's cheek.

and can restrict jaw movement. If the noseband is too low, it may allow the horse to rub the halter off too easily.

If the noseband and chin strap are adjustable, they should be set so that two large fingers (2 inches) may be placed under the noseband. 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. Horses should not be turned out wearing halters. Halters may catch on fences, tree branches or brush. The horse, unable to free itself, panics — usually with serious consequences. 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 to use 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 (Figure 4).

Problem horses

Some horses dislike being tied and are known as halter pullers (Figure 5). 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.

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.

It is a good practice always to tie a horse above the height of its withers, with 2 to 2½ feet of tie rope between the knot and the halter. It is important to keep the horse from dropping its head down and stepping over the rope. The horse must, however, be able to hold its head at its normal height.

Tying a horse to a smooth horizontal pole or to a picket line can be safely done in a manner 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.

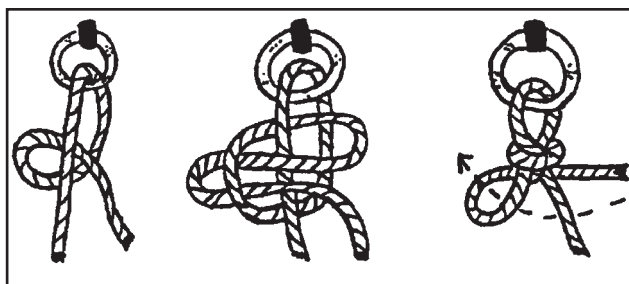


Figure 4. Quick-release knot



Figure 5. Being tied uncomfortably or in an unsafe area can teach a horse to be a halter puller. This horse may soon pull back.

Hobbles

When there are no suitable objects to which a horse can be tied, it may be possible to use hobbles. This might be useful on trail rides or when stopping in an open park or pasture. The horse must first be trained to accept the hobbles. This is best done when the horse is first being trained, by an experienced horse person in a round pen with soft ground. It should be noted that some horses can travel a fair distance when only the front legs are hobbled to each other.

Cross tying

Cross tying requires not only special equipment but also 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 side 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, it is apt to try harder to break loose the next time it 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 are less likely to become bored or frightened. Horses should never be tied fast with bridle reins. Bridles were not designed to act as halters. Nor were reins intended to be used as tie ropes.

Figure 1 and assistance with revision thanks to Jennifer Nabors.

