

# Frequently Asked Questions

## **What are electrolytes? When should I give electrolytes to my horse?**

Electrolytes are minerals essential to a horse's ability to function properly. Without adequate electrolytes, horses can be effected in ways ranging from tiredness, muscle cramps, thumps, to tying-up syndrome. During heavy, prolonged exercise significant levels of sodium, chloride, potassium, calcium, and magnesium are lost through sweating. One to two ounces of an electrolyte supplement given once or twice a day with feed or by syringe starting at least a day before traveling to the endurance ride is generally recommended. The horse should continue to receive electrolytes during the competition and after completing the ride.

Commercial supplements are available, but look for electrolytes formulated for distance riding (these do not contain sugars). Using a recipe from UGA, electrolytes may be prepared at home by mixing 2 parts table salt (for sodium and chloride), 2 parts lite salt (for potassium), and 1 part dolomite (for calcium and magnesium). Dolomite powder may be purchased through a health food store. To administer by syringe, mix with water or applesauce.

## **What should I know about feeding before the ride?**

Nutrition guidelines for endurance horses emphasize the importance of grass and/or hay forage. When forage is supplemented with a feed to meet the energy requirements of training and competition, a good quality high fat, low protein feed is recommended.

In the morning prior to competition, it is recommended that you do not feed your horse a grain meal less that four hours prior to the start of the ride. By the time you reach the first vet check during competition, feeding grain in addition to hay is fine. Free choice hay and grass at all times is desirable. (And don't forget to electrolyte.)

## **What should I do when I first arrive at camp?**

People generally arrive at an endurance ride on Friday afternoon before the Saturday competition and camp overnight both Friday and Saturday nights. It is up to you to secure your horse for the night; most people use portable electric corrals or picket lines. You will probably use a picket line the first time you go to a ride or you might even tie your horse to the trailer. You can see the various camping styles and decide what will work best for your horse. Naturally, you must provide your horse with water, hay and grain, and make him as comfortable as possible. Once you have set up your campsite, you should go to the secretary's desk and register. Be sure to have current Coggins papers with you, as they are required. You will pay the fees and get a vet card or "vet book" at this time. You should find out when the "vetting in" will be done and when the riders' meeting will be held.

## **What is the “vet in”?**

At the “vet in” or the pre-ride vet check, the ride veterinarian checks the horses to see that they are sound and healthy to start the ride. When you take your horse to be vetted, bring your ride card with you. The vet will write down his or her evaluation of your horse on this card, and you are required to have it with you at all of the vet checks throughout the ride the next day. Numbers or letters are usually painted on the horse’s croup at the vetting in, for easy identification during the competition.

## **What should I have at the vet check area for the horse and the rider?**

The afternoon before the ride is a good time to select a spot convenient to the vet check area to set up with the things you will want for taking care of your horse and yourself during the ride. The single most important thing to have at the vet check is drinking water for your horse.

During hot and humid seasons of the year, have additional water for cooling your horse by sponging or pouring water on the horse; however, keep drinking and sponging buckets separate since many horses will not drink from buckets that have had sweaty sponges in them.

If the weather is cool, you may want to have a blanket or rump rug to put over your horse to prevent him from stiffening up.

Your horse will want to eat. Hay, grain, rehydrated beet pulp, and treats of apples and carrots are commonly offered. During the ride, it is usually a good idea to wait until you have gotten through the P/R and vet check before you allow the horse to eat. Let your horse drink at any time, but since eating tends to drive the heart rate up you may want to wait until you have gone through the vet check before letting your horse eat.

Other equipment and supplies to consider having available at the vet check:

- Stethoscope for checking your horse’s heart rate prior to entering the P/R area
- Electrolytes to administer by syringe or mixed with the horse’s feed
- Saddle rack (Most vets will require that the horse be presented at one or more vet checks without the saddle to facilitate examination of the horse for tack/saddle galls. Also, horses will cool off, relax, and drop their heart rates more quickly without a saddle.)
- Fluids for the rider (It is important for the rider as well as the horse to remain hydrated.)
- Snacks for the rider

## **What happens at the riders’ meeting?**

The riders’ meeting is usually held shortly before dark, or after all the horses have been vetted. The purpose of the meeting is to provide essential information about the ride, especially about the trail (how long the segments are, how the trails are marked, any special hazards, etc.) and the vet checks. The ride manager and the head ride vet will usually conduct this briefing. The vet will tell the riders what the pulse requirements are for passing the vet checks, how long the hold times will be for the checks, and similar information. Limited Distance rides are usually 25 to 35 miles in length, and have one

vet check about half way through. Open Division rides are typically 50 and 100 miles in length with vet checks held every 10 to 15 miles. There is normally a separate meeting held immediately after the general meeting intended especially for new riders. You should ask questions about anything you don't understand.

### **What should I do in the morning before the official start time?**

Most Limited Distance riders start thirty to sixty minutes after the Open Division rides have started. All riders competing in the same distance have the same start time. If you are a first time rider, it is advisable to stay to the back of the field and let the more experienced entries lead the way.

Prior to the start of the ride:

Take some time to warm up your horse.

Near the starting line, roll call is typically taken about 15 minutes prior to the official start.

If your horse is nervous, excitable, or difficult to control, let the starting crowd get out of sight. You (and other riders who are new to the sport or veteran riders with a new horse) can wait for a few minutes after the trails are opened before riding out. If you do wait a few minutes after the official start time to begin your ride, you still need to check in for roll call prior to the official start time.

### **What do I do when I arrive at the vet check?**

Procedures vary from region to region and even from ride to ride as to how the vet check is organized. For this reason, it is important to pay close attention at the riders' meeting. However, generally speaking, when you arrive at the check, you will give your rider card to the "Arrival Timer" who will write down the time on it and return it to you. This person should be positioned so that it will be easy for you to find him or her as you approach the vet check. Once you get the card back, you should give your horse water (all he wants) and check his pulse with a stethoscope, if you have one. If your horse is hot, you may want to cool him off by sponging water on his neck and legs. Some riders have a "pit crew" to help them take care of the horse at the vet checks, so that they might be free to see to their own needs. Most rides require the horse to drop to a pulse of 60 in the Limited Distance and to a pulse of 64 in the Open Division before your "hold" time begins. If you are riding your horse within his present ability, he should recover to a 64 pulse within a few minutes of arrival at the vet check area. Horses that are in good condition will usually recover within ten minutes or less. Be aware that hot, muggy weather can cause a horse to stay at a high pulse rate so you must adjust your pace accordingly. A horse not recovering to the required pulse within thirty minutes of arrival will not be allowed to continue for this is a clear indication that he cannot cope with the workload being asked of him.

As soon as you think your horse has reached pulse criteria, you can take him to the "P/R area" (pulse and respiration area) which is often marked off with surveyor's tape. A "Pulse Taker" will check the pulse and record it on the vet card. Your hold time begins at this point. Most rides have hold times of thirty to forty minutes. (If your horse's pulse

is too high, you will be asked to leave the P&R area and return again when it is lower. At some rides, you receive a time penalty for calling for a check too early). If your horse is down to the required pulse rate (either 60 or 64), you will go to the vet for a more thorough exam. The horse will be trotted for soundness and checked for hydration, attitude, and metabolic condition. It is important that you educate yourself as soon as possible on how to evaluate these indicators of metabolic fitness. When this exam is complete, you will receive your vet card back. You are then free to do as you like for the rest of your hold time; just be sure you know what your out-time is (it is usually recorded in the P/R box by the Pulse Taker). Of course, you should see that your horse has all of the water he wants and that he is made as comfortable as possible. It is advisable to give your horse electrolytes at all checks and to allow him to graze or to have hay. When it is time for you to go back out, you should go to the "Out timer". Let the timer know you are there; you cannot leave the vet check until you are released by the Out Timer.

### **What is expected of the horse in the P/R area and during the vet exam?**

Always be courteous and respectful of the vets, the P/R staff, and the ride management's helpers. Without them, the ride would not be possible and they are there out of the goodness of their hearts, not because they have to be.

As the rider, you are expected to maintain control of your horse at all times. While working your way through the P/R line, don't crowd other horses; crowding increases the risk of injury to the P/R staff, other riders, and other horses. Don't hesitate to ask others around you to give you a little more room.

In the P/R area, your horse should stand quietly for the P/R staff to take its heart rate. The heart rate is taken on the left side of the horse. If your horse's heart rate is not down to criteria, exit the P/R area from the direction you entered. Wait a few minutes to give your horse additional time to get its heart rate down further before re-entering; you may want to help your horse cool down by sponging him off with water. After the horse's heart rate is down to criteria (typically 60 beats per minute for the 25-mile distance and 64 beats per minute for longer distances) and is documented on your ride card, you will proceed to the vet. Your horse should stand still while the vet examines the horse for metabolic (hydration, heart, gut) factors.

For the vet to gauge soundness, the horse should be able to trot out and back 150 feet in a straight line. Occasionally, at either the pre-ride vet check or during vet checks on the ride day, you will be asked to trot your horse in a figure eight or in circles. Practice this at home, not in the vet check. In fact, it is a good idea to practice all aspects of a vet check at home: listening for gut sounds and the heart rate with a stethoscope, testing for hydration, and trot outs (in a straight line, in circles, and in a figure eight).

*The rider is ultimately responsible for the welfare of the horse.* If you think there is anything wrong with your horse, tell the vet. By telling the vet, the vet can help you; you will not be automatically pulled from the ride.

## **What are the primary ways a vet evaluates a horse?**

The vet assesses the horse for its metabolic and mechanical condition. The vet uses a number of tests including:

Temperature: Normally taken on the day before the ride in the pre-ride vet check. Normal temperatures range from 99 degrees to 101.5 degrees F.

Heart rate: Most horses have a resting heart rate of 32 to 44 beats per minute.

Hydration: There are three primary tests for hydration:

- 1) Mucous membranes: the inner eyelids and gums are examined for color for good blood perfusion of the tissues. (Pink is good.)
- 2) Capillary refill time: to evaluate the ability of the heart to replenish the capillary system, the gums are pressed by the thumb and the time measured for the gums to return to the color of the surrounding gum tissue. The capillary refill time is typically less than 2 seconds in the pre-ride vetting.
- 3) Skin elasticity: skin elasticity is measured by pinching the skin over the shoulder. The skin snaps back instantly in a fully hydrated horse.

Gut Sounds: Gut sounds in the flank and abdomen should be heard as a light gurgle or rumble. The rating of gut sounds ranges from hyperactive, normal, slight, diminished, or non-existent.

Soundness: Horses that are consistently lame at a straight-line trot are not permitted to start or finish a ride; however, horses with an irregular gait or that are slightly “off” due to minor muscle soreness may be judged “fit to continue”.

Other:

Tack sores and wounds are tested for soreness and sensitivity.

Legs are tested for obvious problems such as swellings, filling in the joints or tendon.

Quality of movement or the impulsion (the spring in the step) in the gait and willingness to trot in hand.

Any minor observance might be recorded on your vet card as a frame of reference for subsequent vet checks.

If, for any reason, your horse requires treatment outside of the vet check that includes fluids, bandages, drugs, etc., you are responsible (not ride management) for paying the vet’s fee for veterinary supplies and/or treatment.

All vet decisions are final!

## **What are the grades of lameness and how are they applied to the “fit to continue” vet criteria?**

Lameness is graded on a scale of I to V, where Grade V is the most severe lameness. A horse that is Grade III or more is judged not fit to continue. Horses with a Grade I or II lameness are usually permitted to continue depending on other vet criteria (heart rate,

hydration, etc) and whether or not, in the vet's judgment, the lameness might be expected to worsen. Specifically, the grades of lameness are defined as follows:

Grade I: A barely discernable lameness seen inconsistently or intermittently while the horse is being trotted.

Grade II: A slight, inconsistent lameness that usually is more consistent when the horse is trotted in one direction and is non-existent or almost unobservable when the horse is trotted in other directions.

Grade III: A consistently observable lameness when trotted in all directions.

Grade IV: The lameness is obvious with marked nodding.

Grade V: There is minimal weight bearing on one leg or inability to move.

One other note: if the vet finds your horse to be lame, the vet check line, with other horses waiting, is not the time and place for an examination of your horse for a detailed diagnosis and treatment discussion. Most vets are willing to take a further look at your horse when there are not horses waiting to be vetted.

### **What is a CRI?**

A CRI is the Cardiac Recovery Index which is an early-warning indicator of the horse's metabolic condition. The CRI is measured by: 1) taking the horse's pulse, 2) trotting the horse out and back 125 feet, 3) rechecking the pulse after 60 seconds from the first pulse check. A good CRI index is one where the second pulse is equal or less than the first. A poor CRI is one where the second pulse is greater than the first. Use of the CRI is the option of the vet and is most commonly used under hot and humid or otherwise strenuous ride conditions.

A horse is not pulled from a ride on the basis of a CRI alone. Used in conjunction with other metabolic and mechanical measures (lameness, hydration, gut sounds, etc), the CRI provides a vet additional, quantifiable information to assess a horse's fitness to continue.

### **What is the drug policy in endurance riding?**

Under American Endurance Ride Conference (AERC) rules, under which all Southeast Endurance Riders Association (SERA) rides are conducted:

The integrity of endurance competition requires that the equine is not influenced by any drug, medication or veterinary treatment. Endurance equines must compete entirely on their natural ability. AERC prohibits from competition equines who contain evidence of the administration of abnormal substances or of normal substances in abnormal amounts.

The use of additional therapies during competition shall be prohibited. This shall include any invasive procedures (eg: acupuncture), manipulative procedures (osseous manipulative procedures), the use of any devices to manipulate or stimulate accupressure or response points (eg: bioscans, laser lights, magnetic stimulation devices, etc.). Competition shall mean the time from the pre-ride veterinary examination to the completion of the final veterinary examination for the event, including Best Condition judging.

### **How is the order of placing at the finish line determined?**

In a Limited Distance ride, the order of placing is determined by the order in which the horses recover to a pulse of 60 or below in the P/R box. Therefore, the horse that crosses the finish line first is not necessarily the winner. This is done as a safety precaution for the horses. If you race in, it is very likely that your horse's pulse will stay above 60 for some time, so it makes sense to finish at a reasonable pace and be ready to check the horse's pulse almost as soon as you dismount. If your horse does not recover to 60 or less within 30 minutes of finishing, you will not get a completion. In addition to recovering to a 60 pulse, the horse must also be judged "fit to continue" by the vet before he can receive a completion. The order of placing for the Open Divisions is the order of the riders crossing the finish line for all horses that receive a completion by meeting pulse and fit to continue criteria.

In order for the rider to receive mileage credit for the ride from the American Endurance Ride Conference, a Limited Distance ride of 25 miles must be completed in six hours or less, including the hold time; an Open Division ride of 50 miles must be completed within twelve hours, including hold times. However, most individual rides do not have a time requirement for earning a completion award. Regardless, you should not go faster than you think your horse can safely handle.

### **What is Best Condition?**

Most rides give a Best Condition award in both the Open Division and in the Limited Distance events. In the Open Division the top ten finishing horses are eligible for consideration. Usually the Best Condition exam is conducted at a half hour or one hour after completing the ride. This is a more thorough exam than the completion exam, and each horse is given a numerical score for each of the metabolic and mechanical factors deemed significant. Riding time and weight of the rider with tack usually influence the final score.

### **What should I do after completing the ride?**

You have not truly completed the ride until you have completed the post-ride vet exam. Until this final vet exam (plus the Best Condition exam if you complete the ride as one of the top ten finishers) is conducted, do not use any liniments or medications (see the drug policy above).

The horse should have plenty of hay and water. A grain feeding can wait until the horse has rested for an hour or so. Blanket the horse if weather conditions so indicate. The horse can benefit from brief, periodic strolls after completing the ride to minimize stiffness and soreness.

Awards are usually given as soon as all of the riders are in. The value of the awards varies greatly, but everyone receives a completion award. Additional awards are often given for first to finish, top ten, top weight division riders, top junior, and Best Condition

It is best to camp overnight after a ride before trailering home. Equine science has demonstrated that time spent trailering is equivalent to a slow trot for the horse. Transporting a horse immediately after a ride induces additional stress on the horse, increasing the risk of conditions such as exhaustion or colic. If for any reason your horse had any trouble during the ride, trailering the horse may not be a wise decision.

Before you leave camp for your trip home, be sure to leave a clean camp: dispose of your garbage or take it with you, bag or scatter manure and leftover hay.

### **What does the well-dressed endurance horse wear?**

Endurance riders prefer tack that is lightweight and cool, does not rub, and is comfortable for the horse. Although you will see just about any kind of saddle at an endurance ride, lightweight saddles are most common since the lighter weight minimizes fatigue and is generally cooler for the horse.

Bioplastic tack (such as Biothane) is very popular for halter/bridles, breast collars, and cruppers because it does not rub and cleans up easily with water. Breast collars are used by most riders for safety's sake in holding the saddle in place and to minimize saddle shifting in hilly terrain.

A sponge, attached to a string or thin leash and clipped to the saddle, is used to cool the horse on the trail by dropping the sponge into a creek or water puddle, pulling the sponge back up by the string/leash, and squeezing the water on the horse's neck and shoulders.

A ride card holder that attaches to the saddle or breast collar is a convenient way to keep up with your ride card and trail map. By putting the ride card and map inside a ziplock baggy, the ride card and map will stay dry despite rain, sweat, and sponging. Many ride card holders will also hold a stethoscope.

Water bottles for drinking water can be carried in fanny packs, cante bags or cases that clip to a D-ring.

Easy Boots, in case a shoe is pulled on the trail, can be carried in a cante bag or in bags specially designed for Easy Boots.

### **What does the well-dressed endurance rider wear?**

*The well-dressed endurance rider wears a helmet!*

### **What trail courtesies are expected of the rider?**

At water stops (water crossings, puddles, ponds or water troughs beside the trail) where horses are drinking, stop and wait for those horses to stop drinking or ask if you may go on. Many horses, even when thirsty, will not drink if another horse is leaving.

Do not put your sponge into drinking water in any water tanks or buckets provided by ride management unless you know for sure which, if any, are provided for sponging. It is okay to sponge from creeks, ponds, and puddles at any time.

If you see a rider stopped on the trail, ask if you can help.

If you wish to pass a rider, ask that rider for permission to pass if the trail is narrow, but be prepared to wait until the trail widens. If the trail is wide enough so that the rider(s) ahead of you do not have to move over, let them know you intend to pass (“passing on your left”)---the riders ahead of you are not mind readers!

Riders with horses that are prone to kick or bite other horses that get too close often use ribbons to give other riders warning. A ribbon in the tail signals a kicker. A ribbon in the mane indicates a biter. A stallion may have a yellow ribbon in his mane. If you approach a horse with a ribbon, take extra care to stay off their hindquarters. Since any horse can kick (with or without a tail ribbon), it is important to let the rider ahead of you know of your intention to pass.

If you see a trail hazard, give other riders behind you a warning: for example, “hole on the right!”

***“To finish is to win”***

*For more information visit the American Endurance Ride Conference web site ([aerc.org](http://aerc.org)) and the Endurance Net web site ([endurance.net](http://endurance.net)).*

**Some final words of advice:**

Above all else, take care of your horse.

Ride your own ride, not somebody else's. (Plan your ride and ride your plan.)

Be flexible: every ride day offers new conditions and challenges, and each ride manager conducts his/her ride a little differently.

If you have questions, just ask. Ride management, veteran endurance riders, experienced vet crews, and P/R staff will be happy to help.

And last, but not least:

***“To finish is to win”***