

# Poor Human Practices

## Hobbling

### SEBWAT parameter

(Standardised Equine-Based Welfare Assessment Tool)

#### Hobbling

### Welfare issue

- The term “hobbling” refers to the practice of tying any part of the animal’s limbs.
- Any combination of limbs may be tied including: fore limbs tied together, hind limbs tied together, one fore tied to one hind; hind limb tied to neck. Hobbling can also refer to the practice of tying the animal’s limb to either a fixed point (e.g. a tree) or a heavy weight (e.g. a tyre); or tying up of one limb so only three feet are on the ground.
- This practice can leave characteristic lesions on the skin which can be easily observed.



Top to bottom: different types of hobbling.

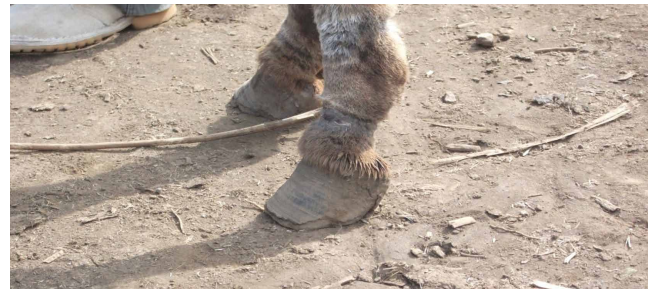
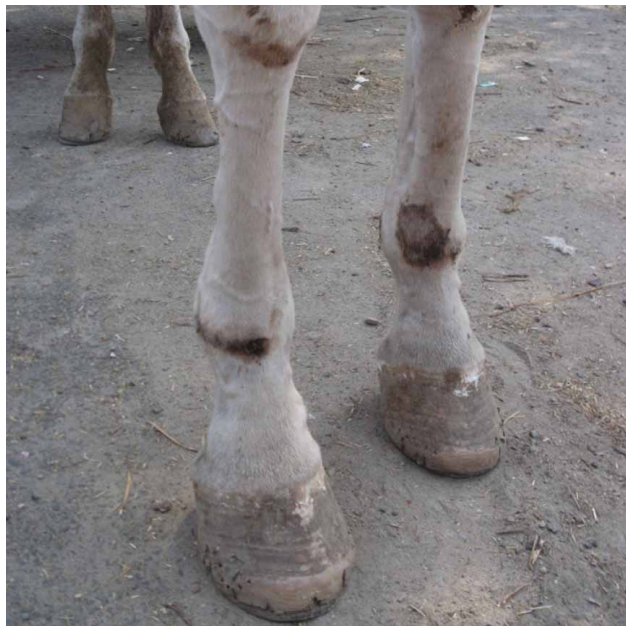


## Welfare significance

### Injury and infection

- Hobbles can be tied around any part of the limb and they can rub or cut into the skin leading to lesions, infection and swelling.
- When tying around the lower limbs, pressure on the tendons can cause damage and inflammation of the tendons, leading to lameness.
- The skin around the pasterns is particularly delicate, and being near to the ground, injuries in this easily be contaminated by soil, urine or faeces increasing the risk of infection.
- Dermatophilosis (mud fever or greasy heel) is commonly found on the caudal pasterns of equids wearing hobbles<sup>1</sup>. The condition is made worse by moisture and abrasion and is characterised by inflamed skin with tufted hair and crusted scabs. If the infection worsens, the skin can develop deep cracks or fissures (cracked heels) and the animal will become lame.
- Hobbled equids are at increased risk of tripping and falling, as limbs can become entangled in the tethering ropes, especially if the animal tries to move quickly or suddenly.
- In addition to the above, the practice of tightly tying up a limb also risks cutting off the circulation to the limb, causing severe discomfort and pain. This practice will make the animal particularly susceptible to falls as it cannot use its limbs adequately to balance, especially if jostled by other animals or startled.

<sup>1</sup> Brooke (2013)



Top: Hobbling injuries.

Bottom: Examples of poor hobbling practice.

### **Inhibiting rest and recuperation**

- Often the hobbled animal cannot lie down or stand up easily, preventing adequate or comfortable rest after work.
- Exhaustion causes suffering and increases the risk of injury or collapse during work.
- Hobbles may also prevent the animal from accessing resources such as feed, water and shade, which can lead to loss of condition, dehydration or heat stress.

### **Detrimental effect on social and defensive behaviours**

- By restricting movement, hobbles inhibit the animal from normal social interaction with other animals, e.g. play, mutual grooming. As herd animals, equids benefit from social interaction with conspecifics, and preventing this can have a negative impact on psychological welfare.
- Restricting movement may also inhibit rolling behaviour, which is an important means of self-grooming and relaxation for equids.
- Equids are highly attuned to signals from others within the herd; preventing an equid from responding to, or retreating from, aggressive threat displays can cause stress. This can lead to bullying and fear within the herd, and increased risk injury from aggressive interactions such as bites or kicks. This likelihood is further increased when animals are kept in crowded conditions.
- Injuries may be caused by dogs or other predators, as hobbled equids can neither defend themselves sufficiently nor escape if attacked.
- Ill-intentioned humans may harm, harass or steal hobbled equids, who are unable to defend themselves or escape.
- As a prey species, equids have a natural instinct to run away from any frightening stimuli (flight response), for example perceived predators such as dogs or humans. Restricting this natural response can cause fear and stress. If the animal lives in an environment where perceived predators commonly roam near to hobbled equids, accidents and chronic stress may occur.

### **Inhibition of normal musculo-skeletal development**

- When young equids are frequently hobbled, this restriction of natural movement can impact on the development of the growing musculo-skeletal system. If the animal's movement is consistently restricted the muscles can become atrophied (wasted). This will be worse if the hobbles are always used on the same side.
- In the early stages of muscle atrophy this will cause stiffness and discomfort, but if not addressed the muscles will begin to waste away and muscle mass will decrease.
- An animal regularly hobbled, particularly since a young age, who develops chronic muscular atrophy may display asymmetrical skeletal and muscle development (one side of the body appears smaller and more wasted compared to the other).
- This will cause the animal to be weaker, less productive at work, and to suffer more discomfort and injuries whilst working than one with correct and even musculo-skeletal development.

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### **Possible causation**

#### **Reasons why hobbles are used include:**

- To prevent the animal straying, especially near roads or private land.
- To make the animal easier to catch.
- When turn out/grazing areas are unfenced/ inadequately fenced.
- To prevent the animals from fighting with each other.
- To prevent the animal from kicking.
- To increase the density of animals that can be housed in one area.
- Indoors, to prevent the animal soiling its feed or around the stable.



### Hobble injuries can be caused by:

- Abrasive or inflexible materials. Nylon webbing (e.g. car seat belts or lorry webbing straps) and other harsh man-made materials (e.g. plastic rope) should not be used as they make a sharp edge against the skin. Soft, natural materials (e.g. leather, cotton, plant fibres) will minimise the risk of abrasion and lesions.
- Thin hobbles. Hobbles should never be made from thin rope or wire as these will cut into the skin as the animal moves. Thicker materials are preferable as they distribute pressure over a wider area of skin, reducing the likelihood of skin breakage.
- Consistent hobbling of the same part of same limb. Alternating which limbs are hobbled can reduce damage to the skin<sup>2</sup>.
- Tight hobbles. Slip knots (become increasingly tighter when pressure is applied) should never be used to hobble an animal as the knot will tighten and damage the skin or even cut off blood circulation to the hoof.
- Hobble ropes becoming tangled and putting greater pressure on limbs.
- Owners pulling on hobble ropes to lead or drag the animal.



Safely tethered equine.

### Means of resolution

- Tethering by the neck is recommended as an alternative method of preventing animals from straying. Tethering has the advantage over hobbling because it gives the animal greater freedom to express natural behaviour, feed, drink, rest and defend themselves, whilst still being suitably restrained.
- Equids should be tethered using either a head-collar or wide neck-strap (whichever is chosen must be well fitting to avoid injury or being pulled over the animal's head) and a strong rope. Nylon webbing should be avoided as it tangles up very easily, thus shortening the length of tether available to the animal.
- The end of the rope should be attached to a tether spike driven into the ground so it is flush with the ground surface to prevent injury. Care should be taken if tethering to trees or posts, as the animal can wind its rope around the tree to the point where it becomes immobilised or choked.
- Animals should be tethered close enough to see one another, but far enough apart to avoid tethers becoming tangled.
- Animals should be able to access water, shade and feed when tethered.
- Limb hobbling should only be used as a temporary means of restraint, not as a substitute for providing more comfortable resting opportunities for the animals.
- If limb hobbling is used, the limbs should be closely monitored so that early signs of injury can be identified and remedial action taken.

**Further advice on tethering/hobbling can be found in the Hobbling and Tethering Factsheet produced by the Brooke<sup>3</sup>.**

*Refer to the Working Equid Veterinary Manual, Community Engagement work plans or strategies and the Handling Guidelines before conducting an intervention.*

<sup>2</sup> Zaman (2008)

<sup>3</sup> Brooke (date unknown)

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## References

Agriculture Victoria (2015) *Code of Practice for the Welfare of Horses*; The State of Victoria; <http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/animal-health-and-welfare/animal-welfare/animal-welfare-legislation/victorian-codes-of-practice-for-animal-welfare/code-of-practice-for-the-welfare-of-horses-revision-1>, accessed December 2015.

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