

Advice on
Horses and Fireworks



Introduction

Fireworks are a complex matter. Although they can cause great distress to horses and other animals, there is currently no legislation preventing a person from setting off fireworks on their own property as long as it is for private entertainment. Commercial displays have to hold appropriate licenses (check with your local council for details) and comply with regulations. You can see these at www.berr.gov.uk/fireworks.

Why do horses react badly to fireworks?

Horses are flight animals and anything unexpected will startle them. The response will vary greatly according to the individual horse, but reactions can be extremely dramatic and potentially dangerous for the horse or anyone close by.

It is well documented that horses will become desensitised to stimuli to which they are regularly exposed. Part of the problem of fireworks is that they do not usually occur frequently and they produce loud bangs, crackles, sudden strange lights and a burning smell. It is not easy for owners to reproduce this combination of things to enable complete desensitisation of the horse.

Horses are big, powerful animals and when they are in a state of blind panic they present real danger not only to people close by, but also to themselves. The British Horse Society has had reports of stabled horses attempting to jump over or crash through stable doors and field-kept horses jumping out of their field onto the public highway – neither of which result in a favourable outcome.

The laws concerning fireworks (in brief)

- It is illegal for anyone below the age of 18 to possess a firework in a public place
- Fireworks cannot be set off by a private individual between 11pm and 7am except on certain nights of the year
- It is an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any captive or domestic animal
- Unless retailers possess a special licence they may only sell fireworks from 15 October to 10 November and 26 to 31 December



Detailed legislation on fireworks and their use can be found at www.berr.gov.uk/fireworks

What can you do to limit the effect on your horse?

Prior to firework season

- Find out if there are any commercial displays planned near to where your horse is kept
- Contact the organisers to explain your concerns and see if there are any measures they can take – for example, moving to the far end of a site and ask about timings so you can manage your horse appropriately to keep the situation as safe and calm as possible
- Check with your local council that the organisers have applied for and been granted the appropriate licence for a commercial display
- Display the BHS Fireworks Awareness poster (available to download at our specialised horse accidents website, www.horseaccidents.org.uk/Advice_and_Prevention/Fireworks.aspx in local shops, schools and village notice boards to try to explain to non-horse owners why horses are frightened by fireworks
- Display a notice alongside the poster asking private individuals who are planning to use fireworks in your vicinity to inform you so you can manage your horse appropriately
- It may be beneficial to try to desensitise your horse to loud bangs and there are various CDs available that can be played to your horse at low level, slowly increasing the volume as they become comfortable with the noise
- Discuss and try to agree a strategy for dealing with fireworks with the yard owner and fellow liveryes – that way, everyone has support
- Ensure you have contact details to hand for all horse owners and vets should problems arise
- Make preparations to secure your yard in case a horse does manage to break out of a stable or field that ensures they cannot get onto a public highway which could cause serious problems

Extreme measures

If you know that whatever you do, your horse will react badly, possibly injuring themselves, you could discuss the possibility of sedating your horse with your vet, or consider moving your horse while fireworks are likely to be exploding.

During firework season

- If your horse is kept in a barn or enclosed stable area it might be possible to limit the effect of fireworks by keeping barn doors closed
- Playing music within the barn or stable area may dull the sound of the bangs depending on the distance – NB: This should be introduced before the event so the music is itself not something for the horse to worry about
- Leave stable or barn lights on as this may help lessen the effect of the bright lights and flashes in the night sky
- Unfortunately we can do nothing about the burning smell that accompanies fireworks except hope the prevailing wind direction takes it away from the horses
- Try as far as possible to keep your horse in its normal routine so it feels secure
- Ensure an experienced person who will remain calm, stays with the horse until the fireworks have ended
- Take care when the horse is startled, an injured owner is no good to anyone!

If you are unfortunate enough to have a problem caused by fireworks, please report it to The British Horse Society on its dedicated fireworks accident online form at www.horseaccidents.org.uk

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