With the Spring flush of green grass coming up, horse owners should be aware of the tendency of some horses (especially ponies) to founder. Founder (laminitis) can be caused by overeating of grain, hard work on hard surfaces, steroids, fever, toxicity, lush grass, too rapid cool-down when hot and other causes. The microscopic layers that connect the hoof to the bone below become inflamed; this condition is extremely painful and can cripple a horse for life. To prevent grass founder, control the amount of grass your horse has access to in the Spring -- start by allowing your horse out on grass for 10 minutes or so daily, gradually increasing the time on grass. Some animals are so prone to foundering that they can not consume any grass safely and must be kept on a dry lot eating hay.

The gradual change in feed mentioned above is also a good way to help prevent colic, which can be a very serious condition of horses. Colic means abdominal pain; its source can be any abdominal organ including the intestinal tract, liver, kidneys, spleen, ovaries, uterus and bladder. The intestinal tract is the usual source of colic.

Causes include parasites, obstructions, bacterial infections, twists, impactions, changes in feed, infections, obesity, tumors and other causes. A veterinarian should always be consulted when a horse colics because a physical examination is needed to assess whether a case can be managed with medicine or needs surgical intervention.

Signs of colic include restlessness, lack of appetite, kicking or looking at the belly, rolling, sweating, abnormal type or quantity of manure and/or depression. To help prevent colic, feed your horse in a feed bunk to minimize the ingestion of sand; float teeth as needed; worm regularly; make all feed changes gradually; and keep grain locked away. Also make sure that your hay does not contain colic-inducing blister beetles.
Just as you would be sore if you took a four-hour hike after a Winter of inactivity, so will your horse if it asked to work before it is properly conditioned. Condition your horse by gradually increasing the length and degree of your horse's workout over a period of weeks. Begin with walking, progress to trotting, then loping. Long periods of trotting or loping on a good, level surface will help develop your horse's condition and wind; this can be done by longing in a round pen or under saddle. Always warm up with and cool down with extended periods of walking, and never turn a hot, sweating horse out until it has been cooled down by walking first. Walking up hills is excellent, low-impact exercise that develops hindquarter muscles quickly. Your horse must be well-conditioned over a period of weeks before heavy, regular use so that its muscles, tendons and ligaments can strengthen and stretch; tissues in good condition are less likely to experience sprains, strains, bruising, and so on.

If you are a weekend-only rider, you should be aware of a condition called "tying up". Classically, this condition arises when a horse is fed the same ration (including grain) all week, then used very heavily after several days of rest. The muscles resort to anaerobic respiration, waste products accumulate in the muscles and the muscles become painfully inflamed. Signs of this condition usually appear while the animal is in use and include a stiff gait, reluctance to move and painful and swollen rump muscles; dark brown urine may appear later. Affected horses should cease work immediately and a veterinarian should be contacted at once.

Hoof care is another important horse care consideration. Most horses need their feet trimmed every 6-8 weeks. Whether or not your horse needs shoes depends on its use. If you ride your horse at all, it is best to protect all four feet with shoes. "Pasture ornament" horses should at least have their feet trimmed regularly, as painful cracks can develop from overgrown hooves. Many horses need various degrees of corrective shoeing to ensure that they travel correctly. A professional farrier will assess your horse's conformation and intended use and determine the need for special shoe variations such as toe clips, heels, rolled toes, pads, bars and so on.
For their optimal comfort, horses should have an effective fly control product applied over their entire body daily. Properly maintained face masks also help reduce stress and irritation due to flies. The traditional British style of horse management -- horses are stalled during the day and put out at night in the summer -- increases both horse comfort and manure hauling. Good manure management will help reduce the number of flies found near your horses.

Although dental disorders are more common as horses age, even some young horses can have severe conditions that affect their ability to chew food well. During your horse's yearly health examination, make sure your veterinarian checks your horse's teeth for the development of waves, steps, hooks, points, malalignment and other dental abnormalities. Some horses need to have dental procedures such as rasping of rough tooth edges performed every several months.

The purpose of fences is to keep animals safe by keeping them where they belong. Even though they are common and relatively inexpensive, barbed wire fences irreparably damage many horses. The best, safest and most effective fence -- though far from the least expensive or easiest to maintain -- is a three-plank wooden board fence with a smooth electric wire running along the top. This type of fence is sturdy and visually intimidating and the electric wire ensures that the horse will respect this boundary. Many other fencing options are available and you can learn more by talking with fencing dealers, referring to fencing catalogs and talking with other horse owners.

The intent of this pair of horse husbandry articles was to give novice horse owners a brief overview of the factors that responsible horse owner must address. For more information on any of the topics mentioned here, contact your Cooperative Extension livestock agent, veterinarian, or references listed in the last issue. An excellent way for novice horse owners to learn more about horse care is to become a 4-H horse leader and learn by doing. Contact your local Extension office for information about how to join 4-H.