

Racing horses are athletes, and like all athletes, they incur injuries. The vast majority of these injuries are rehabilitative. However, on rare occasions, our equine athletes sustain a catastrophic injury.

Catastrophic Injury: While “catastrophic” is defined as “involving or causing sudden great damage or suffering,” in horse racing, it generally refers to a career-ending or fatal injury.

There are many types of fractures in horses that are reparable with surgery or time away from racing and training. However, a compound fracture (where the broken bone lacerates the skin) carries a great risk for infection, even if the bones are somehow stabilized.

When to operate/when not to: If a horse suffers a broken bone, there is no skin laceration, **and** the horse can place weight upon the injured leg, surgery is generally recommended. The prognosis for healing depends upon how the surgery goes. However, if a horse cannot place weight upon the injured leg, surgery is not recommended.

Why not try?: Horses are physiologically designed to walk around. Their entire circulation and digestive systems are designed for frequent movement, with their weight distributed on all four legs. If a disproportionate amount of their weight is placed on only two or three of their legs, they are prone to laminitis or colic.

Laminitis: A painful disease that leads to perforation of the coffin bone through the sole of the hoof or being unable to stand up, requiring euthanasia.

Colic: Colic in horses is defined as abdominal pain, but it is a clinical symptom rather than a diagnosis. The conditions that cause colic can become life-threatening in a short period of time, especially without surgical intervention.

Can we eliminate catastrophic injuries?: We hope so! Since 2009, the United States has seen a 34% reduction in catastrophic injuries¹, including a 22% decrease since 2018². The New York Racing Association has used all its resources to affect a 43% decrease in racing fatalities at NYRA tracks³ since 2012⁴.

¹ Source: <https://jockeyclub.com/default.asp?section=Advocacy&area=10>

² Source: <https://jockeyclub.com/default.asp?section=Advocacy&area=10>

³ Stats for NYRA tracks came from the New York State Gaming Commission's website. However, they only publish "Equine Breakdown, Death, Injury and Incident," which means that some of these deaths could be from a heart attack, heat stroke, or some other non-broken-bone incident.

⁴ Source: <https://breakdown.gaming.ny.gov/>

Catastrophic injuries are rare: The incidence rate is roughly 1.32⁵ per 1,000 starts, making them statistically rare. The fact is that 99% of the time, a calamitous injury does **not** occur. Even when they do occur, they rarely have much in common. Injuries can occur to a horse in any of its four legs, affecting any one of their 205 bones. These injuries occur on turf, dirt, fast tracks, muddy tracks, on the turn, in the stretch... the list goes on. The wide variety of injuries and circumstances does not offer researchers enough commonalities to pinpoint causation.

Optional FAQs (as the answers may differ from track to track, each racetrack should decide which of these FAQs they use and provide the answer that is true for their track):

Are horses checked by a veterinarian before they are allowed to compete?

Are there veterinarians on the track to monitor horses just before the race?

If a jockey feels like a horse is not sound, do they have to ride them anyway?

What types of medications are permitted on race day?

What types of out-of-competition medications are permitted?

⁵ Average over 2021, 2022, and 2023: <https://jockeyclub.com/default.asp?section=Advocacy&area=10>