

ADVICE ON
Euthanasia

The
British
Horse
Society



Euthanasia (also known as 'putting to sleep' or 'putting down') is sadly something that many horse owners have to face. The reality is that very few horses simply pass away peacefully due to old age. In most cases their health and quality of life will have seriously deteriorated before they reach this point and human intervention is needed. With horses, there is also the ever-present risk of serious illness or injury that may necessitate euthanasia unexpectedly in a horse of any age.

Because horses are unpredictable, it is important to be prepared for what you would do in the event that your horse needs to be euthanased, even if it may seem something that you think only needs to be a concern in the far distant future. Dealing with an emergency is difficult enough without having to make some very hard decisions on the spot and under pressure. By understanding the processes and options available to you if you have to take this course of action and by making appropriate plans you can reduce the trauma of what will inevitably be an extremely upsetting time.

When and Why?

There is no straightforward answer to the question of what reasons justify the decision that a horse should be euthanased, apart from the obvious exception of catastrophic illness or injury. Every situation is different and veterinary or professional advice should always be sought where any doubt exists.

For many horses, the decision to put them to sleep will need to be taken when their quality of life deteriorates. However, it is not always easy to assess quality of life, particularly if you see the horse every day. This makes it difficult to notice gradual changes. Although each horse will be different, the following points may help when trying to assess quality of life:

- Is the horse able to move around freely, particularly when turned out? As a minimum he should be comfortable in walk, trot and, ideally, canter.
- Does the horse have equine company in which he can mix freely without being bullied?
- Is the horse able to lie down and get up again unaided and without too much difficulty?
- Is the horse able to eat and chew comfortably? All horses have a behavioural need to be eating forage for most of the day. If the horse is unable to do this (probably due to worn teeth) then it is time to consider his future. A loss of weight is one indicator that he is having problems chewing.
- Is the horse generally healthy? Or is he suffering from any chronic conditions that are affecting his wellbeing? An example of this might be Recurrent Airway Obstruction – has his breathing deteriorated to the point where he is persistently uncomfortable?
- Does the horse seem 'happy'? If he seems lethargic and depressed, perhaps with dull eyes and coat, then it may be time to take action.

The above list is not intended to be comprehensive but does contain some useful pointers. If you are in any doubt as to your horse's quality of life then you should consult your vet.

Other instances in which euthanasia should be seriously considered include:

- A horse that has become dangerous to handle or ride. The safety of people must remain paramount and if a horse genuinely compromises this, and reasonable steps to correct its behaviour have failed, then euthanasia should be considered as a viable option.
- Lack of other options. If an owner's circumstances have changed so that they are no longer able to keep a horse and there are no straightforward options for rehoming, then euthanasia is often warranted. This may, for example, be the case with an older or unsound horse that has little or no value on the commercial market. Most sanctuaries are not in a position to take on such animals, which leaves very few safe alternatives.

In these instances, it may be prudent to consult your vet and insurance company in order to establish whether you are covered in these circumstances. However, it is **never** acceptable to allow a horse to suffer or have its welfare compromised for financial or insurance reasons.

The widely held perception that life should be preserved at all costs must change. Euthanasia is often the most responsible course of action and the most appropriate to a horse's welfare. It is far more welfare-friendly to give a horse a dignified and timely end to its life than to allow it to suffer or be passed from home to home, facing an uncertain future.

There is much truth in the old adage 'better a week too soon than a day too late'. Euthanasia can often be viewed as the ultimate way in which to prevent suffering rather than being a welfare issue in itself.

How?

The method used to euthanase a horse should be given careful consideration before the event. There are a number of options available, each of which has its own pros and cons.

If the horse is to be euthanased by a vet, the vet should be consulted as to their preferred method. Most vets are more comfortable with a particular technique and may choose to refer the case to a colleague should your choice not match their preference.



Lethal Injection

A lethal injection can only be administered by a veterinary surgeon and will consist of an overdose of anaesthetic drugs. In most cases a sedative will be given before the fatal dose. Shortly after the anaesthetic injection the horse will fall to the ground, where the vet will monitor its pulse until it has ceased. It may take a short time for the heart to stop, and there may be some involuntary muscle twitching or leg movement which can prove distressing to the animal's owner. However, the horse itself will not be conscious during this time and is completely unaware of what is going on. Occasionally, a second anaesthetic injection may be needed to ensure the heart stops but, again, the horse will not be suffering at this point.

The horse will tend to fall quite slowly but this is unpredictable, meaning that the safety of the vet and handler must be considered. However, a skilled handler can influence the direction in which the animal collapses. Many vets will allow the owner to hold the horse while the injections are administered but it is essential that the owner is able to remain alert during the process and if he or she is likely to become too emotional it may be sensible to enlist help from another quarter. The use of a lethal injection has implications for the disposal of the horse's carcass. Animals that have been euthanased by lethal injection cannot enter the human food chain and should not be used for animal food.

Free Bullet

A veterinary surgeon or trained and licensed professional may dispatch a horse using the free bullet. Consequently, this is the method used by knackermen and hunts.

Often a horse will be given a sedative before being euthanased, to ensure that it remains calm. A single bullet is used in the vast majority of cases and is placed in the centre of the horse's forehead, just above the eyes. The horse will fall quickly to the ground which, as with the lethal injection, must be considered from a safety perspective. Some owners may find the sound of the gun distressing and it is important to be aware that there will be some blood. However, these factors are of no consequence to the horse involved.

Sometimes the horse will twitch or spasm after it has been shot, there may also be paddling of the legs. It is not uncommon for the horse to sweat and its heart to continue beating for a short period after it has been shot. These are completely normal reflex actions and do not mean that the horse is still alive or in any way suffering.

The accuracy with which the bullet is given is of great importance. This means that the free bullet may not always be the ideal method for use with fractious or difficult horses.

The use of the free bullet opens up many options for disposal of the horse. The horse may be eligible to enter the human food chain (providing that it has not received any prohibited medicines during its lifetime) or could be used for animal food, for example, by the local hunt.

Abattoir

An equine abattoir is usually the cheapest way to euthanase a horse as owners will normally be paid for the horse's carcass rather than having to finance the procedure themselves. However, abattoirs are not an option for every horse as many will have been signed out of the food chain (this information will be included in the horse's passport) either at the wishes of their owner or because they have received certain medication during their lifetime.

The horse will need to be transported to the abattoir although the abattoir may offer a collection service. This necessitates that the horse is sufficiently healthy to be able to travel without impacting

negatively on its welfare. Consequently, the abattoir is not usually an option in an emergency situation.

The horse will be euthanased using a free bullet by a trained and very experienced marksman. The abattoir may permit the owner to hold the horse while it is despatched or may be willing to allow the owner to spend a few moments with the animal's body following euthanasia.

Equine abattoirs do not operate every day but will usually be able to fit in all horses that turn up 'on spec' on a day when the plant is active. It is, however, usually possible to book an appointment for a specific time

to prevent the need to queue. Alternatively it may be possible to deliver the horse to an abattoir on a day when it is not active, with the animal kept in lairage until the plant is operating.

Using an abattoir solves the problem of disposing of the carcass. Many people find the idea of their horse entering the human food chain distasteful. However, it is important to remember that our welfare responsibility to our animals ends with their death and that the horse is unaffected by what happens to its carcass after death. Using an abattoir is arguably the most environmentally friendly means of dealing with an equine carcass.

Where?

In an emergency situation there will obviously be no option as to where the horse is euthanased. However, where feasible, it is useful to plan ahead in order to make the process as straightforward as possible for the horse and people involved.

If the horse is to be euthanased at home rather than, for example, at an abattoir the site of the euthanasia should be carefully considered. If the horse is to be buried (and the relevant permissions for this have been sought and granted) it is wise to ask the vet to put the horse to sleep as close as

possible to its intended grave. Providing there is sufficient time available the grave should have been prepared prior to the euthanasia.

If the horse's body is to be collected (for cremation for example) then it is prudent to euthanase the horse at a site that is accessible to motor vehicles. In all cases, where it is possible, the site of euthanasia should not be cramped or confined for the sake of the safety of those involved. Ideally it should be away from other animals, particularly if the free bullet is to be used. However, if the horse is

to be euthanased by lethal injection and has a distinctly strong relationship with another horse (such as a mare and foal or close pair bonds) then it may be appropriate for the other animal to be permitted to witness the process. The vet should, however, be consulted as to whether this is permissible.

Under no circumstances should the welfare of the horse be compromised in order to move it to a convenient site for euthanasia. It is helpful to plan ahead and make things as straightforward as possible, but in an emergency these plans will need to be abandoned.

Disposal

After the horse has been euthanased, the question of what to do with the body remains (except if the animal has been taken to an abattoir). Carcass disposal can be very expensive. Removing the body from the site of euthanasia is not an easy process and may be distressing for those who have been involved with the horse during its lifetime. Thus it is wise for the owner to leave the site before the body is removed. Vets are often willing to assist in arranging for a carcass to be removed.

• Burial

European legislation prevents the burial of any horse that has been used as part of a commercial enterprise. When a horse has been kept solely as a pet it may be possible to bury its carcass, but it is essential to seek permission from the Local Authority (usually via Environmental Health) **before** burying the animal. Regulations vary between local authorities, but if the site of burial is near to a water source then it is extremely unlikely that permission will be granted.

Even if permission to bury a horse is obtained it is important to consider the practicalities. The size of the hole required means that heavy plant machinery is likely to be needed and the grave is unlikely to be able to be dug quickly. This means that burial is frequently not a viable option when a horse has been unexpectedly euthanased due to an emergency.

• Cremation

There are many firms that offer pet cremation services, but not all of them are equipped to deal with horses. Furthermore, some firms can only handle ponies so it is useful to investigate which local firms might be able to meet your requirements before you find yourself needing their services.

Cremation is not an inexpensive option but it does come with the advantage that it can be used for animals that have been euthanased by lethal

injection. Most animal crematoriums will collect the horse after it has been euthanased (they may even wait while the euthanasia takes place) and some offer a choice of services. Group cremation is usually considerably cheaper than individual but an individual cremation does give the owner the option of having some, or all, of the ashes returned.

• National Fallen Stock Company

The National Fallen Stock Company (NFSC) offers its members assistance with the collection of animal carcasses and ensures that any collection of stock arranged through it is fully compliant with relevant legislation. It is free to join the National Fallen Stock Company at any time. The horse owner will have to pay for the disposal services that the NFSC facilitates. For more details visit www.nfsc.co.uk

• Hunts and Knackers

Many (but by no means all) hunts offer euthanasia (by free bullet) and a collection/disposal service, although it is important to note that this may not be available immediately in an emergency situation. For details of your nearest hunt visit www.mfha.org.uk

Local knackers will offer a similar service. The costs involved when using a hunt or a knacker will vary locally and it is useful to investigate this before their services are needed. Some zoos and wildlife parks will also collect fallen horses, but this is only an option where the animal has been euthanased by free bullet.

Should you be present?

This is a question only you can answer. Many people feel that they want to be with their horse in its final moments. However, the horse will be in the hands of a professional who has been there many times before and they are the best person to deal with the situation. The process can be distressing and there is no shame in not being present.

The information in this leaflet should have given you some idea about what to expect. It is important to understand what is likely to happen. The key consideration at the time of euthanasia is safety. If you are present you need to be alert and ready to react quickly. If you do not feel that you will be capable of this then you should not be directly involved in the process (for instance, holding the horse). It may be helpful to have an experienced friend in attendance who will also be able to stay with you after the horse has gone.

The removal of the body is not a pleasant experience and it is not recommended that the owner is present for this. By now, the horse is gone and there is nothing to gain by being there.

Other Horses

Although in many situations it is not feasible, you may wish to allow other horses to see and sniff the body after euthanasia has taken place and the site has been secured. However, don't be surprised if the horses choose to ignore the body; this is not unusual.

Passports

After the death of a horse you are legally obliged to inform the relevant Passport Issuing Organisation (PIO) and return the passport to them within 30 days. Many PIOs will return the passport to you afterwards if you request it as a keepsake.

Insurance

If your horse is insured, it is important to be clear exactly what the policy covers if euthanasia is required. The level of cover varies greatly with different policies and, in many cases, only a contribution will be made towards the costs involved. The rest of the expense must be met by the horse owner.

If your horse is being euthanased for non-emergency reasons, it is helpful to talk to the insurance company before you go ahead. It may be that a post mortem is required, which will affect

disposal of the body. If your horse has been euthanased because of an emergency you should contact the insurance company as soon as possible afterwards.

Under no circumstances should a horse be allowed to suffer because of issues with insurance. Even if you do insure your horse you should have contingency plans to fund euthanasia and disposal should this become necessary.

Afterwards

The death of a horse is not an easy event to cope with. For many people it is like losing a member of the family and deep feelings of grief are absolutely normal. It is often helpful to talk to friends or family who understand the size of your loss and there is no need to feel silly or embarrassed about mourning the loss of your friend. There are specialist pet bereavement counsellors who you may find it helpful to contact if you feel it necessary.

Despite their sadness, some people feel the need to get another horse almost immediately. For others it may be months or years before they feel ready. Either scenario is completely normal and you should feel no guilt about your actions. However, if you do decide that you wish to purchase another horse quickly, it is vital to ensure that you are buying the right horse for your needs and not just rushing into buying any horse simply to fill the void.

Euthanasia is not an easy topic to talk or even think about. However, we owe it to our horses to understand the process and to **be prepared** (as far as is possible) should the worst happen. Providing the right care at the end of a horse's life is the last, and possibly greatest, thing we can do for them.

The BHS Welfare Department is always willing to talk to owners about euthanasia and provide any information, advice and support that may be needed at a difficult time, with its Friends at the End support scheme.

Welfare Department

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