

Assessing quality of life for your horse



When you have loved and cared for your horse and provided a good quality of life it is equally important that they have a good end of life. Deciding to euthanize your horse is one of the most difficult decisions an owner will have to make. The quality of the horse's life is defined by their overall physical and mental wellbeing. The increased availability and effectiveness of veterinary procedures and medicine has resulted in increased life span of the horse; strengthening the bond between horse and owner. Longer life makes it increasingly likely that that the owner will need to consider the quality of that prolonged life of their equine companion.

Questions to consider?

1. Have you sought the opinion of your vet regarding the current condition of your horse?
2. Remember how your horse was prior to injury or illness.
3. Do you have the time and energy to support an ageing or ill horse?
4. Have you considered the financial implications of ongoing veterinary care?
5. Have you sought the advice of your insurance company?

It is important to understand that often inexpensive treatments are available to improve the quality of life for older horses and ponies to help manage their conditions and prolong a good quality of life.

Planning in advance

Understanding euthanasia options early is essential, and then you are able to make a clear decision without the added emotion of dealing with the situation. There are two methods available that should be considered, including the disposal of the horse's body as this is a legal requirement for the owner to arrange. This can be done in advance by discussing the options with your vet or by registering with the National Fallen Stock Scheme.

Euthanasia by lethal injection by your vet

The lethal injection is administered by the vet whereby the horse will gradually collapse experiencing a rapid loss of consciousness followed by cardiovascular arrest, the horse may then take a gasp of breath.

Euthanasia by free bullet

This must be carried out by a vet, knackerman, hunt kennel or slaughterman, who has a licence to use a firearm. The muzzle of the gun is placed against the horse's forehead and the bullet discharged into their brain. This will kill the horse instantly with the animal falling to the ground. The horse's limbs may make sudden twitches; these are normal reflexes after death and the heart will still beat for a few minutes even though there is a loss of consciousness.

- The BHS also have an advice and guidance leaflet for euthanasia: <http://www.bhs.org.uk/welfare-and-care/euthanasia-and-friends-at-the-end>
- The BHS Friends at the End (FATE) scheme can provide support for horse owners facing this difficult decision. All of our Friends at the End team have received training from bereavement counsellors, so they have a genuine understanding of the loss and grief that come when a horse dies. They aren't there to take the place of a counsellor or vet, but they can offer an extra source of support both via the phone and on the day, they are also happy to help with making arrangements.
- If you feel that you might benefit from talking to someone through the Friends at the End scheme, contact BHS Welfare on 02476 840517 or friendsattheend@bhs.org.uk and they'll put you in touch with your nearest BHS Friend.

How to use the chart

The chart below will help you visualise and monitor all aspects of your horse's life and help indicate good or poor quality of life. The chart should be used when observing your horse on a daily basis, to monitor their condition. This will help indicate areas of concern. It is important when using this indicator to understand that if you identify **any** of the conditions in the list that you must seek veterinary advice as a slight change in behaviour can indicate that veterinary attention is needed; potentially resulting in improved quality of life for your horse.

Quality of life chart

My horse	Yes	No
1. Does not interact with me in the same way as before e.g. does not come to greet you in the morning		
2. Does not interact with other horses in the same way as before e.g. keeps their distance from the rest of the herd		
3. Is withdrawn, dull or depressed e.g. stands in the corner of the stable with head down		
4. Behaviour has changed significantly e.g. has become aggressive		
5. Does not seem to enjoy life e.g. a change in character such as showing signs of stress		
6. Is not eating its normal amount of hay or forage e.g. a significant amount of hay is being left		
7. Is not as active as normal e.g. stiff movement, reluctant to walk or reduced performance		
8. Has a dull staring coat		
9. Is losing weight		
10. Is having diarrhoea often e.g. for 3 or more days		
11. Is not drinking enough water		
12. Is experiencing discomfort or is not able to urinate e.g. attempts to urinate but nothing happens		
13. Needs help to move or get up e.g. struggles to rise from lying down		
14. Is experiencing pain		
15. Is not weight bearing on one or more limb e.g. cannot comfortably stand on all four limb (s) or is resting a front leg		
16. Is sweating without exercise		
17. Is blowing (panting) without exercise		
18. Is trembling or shaking		