

HORSE 21

Euthanasia



The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.



Euthanasia

No horse should have to suffer unnecessary pain or distress. It is essential that all horse owners are able to make rational, informed decisions concerning their horse's welfare.

A difficult decision

Euthanasia, also known as having a horse 'put to sleep' or 'put down', is an eventuality that many horse owners and keepers sadly have to face at some point. It is an important subject, yet it is an aspect of horse care that is often not given enough consideration. In the event of an emergency, a lack of forward planning can make matters worse.

It is important that all horse owners know the options available and the procedures involved, in order that they are able to make a fully informed decision and act in the best interests of the horse.

A responsible horse owner should be aware of the costs of euthanasia and disposal and be prepared for this eventuality.

Why is euthanasia necessary?

There are a number of reasons why a horse may need to be euthanased. A common one is old age, when the horse's condition has deteriorated to such an extent it no longer has an acceptable quality of life. Other reasons include serious injury, or a disease or illness that cannot be successfully treated.

It is important to remember that a vet can only offer advice on the best course of action for the horse. A vet will not make the decision for a horse owner to have their horse put to sleep. It is advisable

for anyone faced with the possibility of having their horse euthanased, to take time to ensure that the right decision is made. It is often helpful to talk it over with a family member, or with another person who has been in the same situation.

Making the decision

Quality of life – it is generally accepted that if an animal has a poor quality of life then it is the right time for euthanasia. For a horse to enjoy a quality of life it has different needs to a human or pet dog for example, where a relatively sedentary existence may be acceptable.

A horse needs to be able to graze or forage for food for most of the day, it needs to be able to get up and lie down unaided. It needs to be able to walk and trot and preferably canter in a field in which it can move around in easily. It needs the company of other horses which are respectful of it and do not bully.

If it cannot do these things or you cannot offer the facilities then you must discuss with your vet whether it is time to say goodbye. As your old horse ages think ahead to what you would consider an acceptable quality of life and when the time comes you will not hesitate and prolong any suffering.

How is euthanasia carried out?

Horses are euthanased by one of two methods: lethal injection or a humane

killer (gun). The options for euthanasia should be discussed with a vet, in advance of a decision being made. The decision should be based on the best interests of the horse, and the most appropriate method used in the circumstances. Whichever method is used, it must be carried out by a qualified professional who has plenty of experience in this field.

Lethal injection

Euthanasia by lethal injection must only be carried out by a vet. If the horse is of an anxious nature it may first be given a sedative, and then a lethal overdose of anaesthetic drugs is administered intravenously. The horse will collapse gradually, experiencing a rapid loss of consciousness followed by cardiovascular arrest. In some instances, it may be necessary to give a further dose of the lethal agent to the unconscious horse, to stop the heart.

The veterinary surgeon will remain with the horse until it has died, and any natural reflex reactions have ceased. It is not unusual for minor muscle tremors, noises or twitching of the more sensitive parts of the horse (such as the nostrils and muzzle) to occur for a short time after death. This is a natural response of the body systems and, though this may be of concern to the horse's owner, it is not an indication that the euthanasia has not been successful.

Shooting

In the interests of welfare and safety, a horse should only be shot by a trained, competent person, who has a licence to use a firearm. The procedure can be carried out by a vet, a knackerman, a hunt kennel or a slaughterman.

The horse may be given a sedative beforehand to ensure it is calm. As this can only be administered by a vet, it may be preferable to euthanase by lethal injection those animals which require a sedative.

The muzzle of the gun is placed against the horse's forehead, and a bullet is then discharged into the brain. This kills the horse immediately and it will fall to the ground straight away. Some bleeding from the bullet hole and the nostrils is to be expected, though it can range from a slight trickle to a strong discharge. Fresh horse manure placed on top of any residues and left for a short time before being safely disposed of, is the best means of cleaning up any discharge.

The horse's limbs may make sudden twitches when it is on the ground; these are normal reflexes after death and can occur even though the animal is no longer alive.

Where should a horse be euthanased?

In a non-emergency situation, a horse owner should have already part planned how and where their horse

should be euthanased. It is kinder to have a horse put down in familiar surroundings, with consideration also given to any companion. From a practical point of view, there should be suitable vehicle access to the planned area, which should be away from other animals. In certain situations, generally where one of two closely bonded horses (such as a mare and foal or two elderly companions) has to be euthanased, it may be appropriate to euthanase by lethal injection in the presence of the other animal. The body should then be left in situ for a short period for the pair-bond to accept that the animal is dead. This can help avoid unnecessary fretting and distress. Consideration needs to be given to providing appropriate companionship for the surviving horse.

It is also important to think about general safety, and how to minimise access and distress to anyone who may be in the vicinity. A rug or blanket should be on hand, to place over the carcass if there is likely to be a delay between euthanasia and collection. Proper preparation at an early stage will help the procedure to be carried out quickly, quietly and easily. It is a good idea to discuss your plans with a vet, as they will be able to offer advice and understanding at this difficult time.

If it is not possible to have the horse destroyed at home, then the owner must ensure the horse is fit to travel. A vet will

need to be consulted to confirm that the horse is capable of travelling, as both horse owner and vet must comply with the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997. In addition to physical health, the mental well-being of the horse must also be considered if it is to be transported and then euthanased. Generally, only those animals that are used to loading and travelling, and which do so without undue concern, should be transported to an unfamiliar place to be put to sleep. Horses should only travel short distances in these circumstances and close attention must be given to their welfare during transport.



In an emergency where euthanasia is the only humane option – for example a serious accident, injury or illness – the horse will need to be put down without delay and the horse owner may not have time to choose a preferred location.

Arrangements for disposal of the body

It is the responsibility of the horse owner to arrange for the disposal of the horse's body. It is advisable that all owners give this some thought beforehand. Consider what is available in the area, and the costs involved, as this may be a determining factor in the method of euthanasia that is chosen.

If your horse had a lethal injection, or other drugs, the options for disposal are limited to cremation, incineration, or burial – subject to certain legal restrictions.

In the past, hunt kennels and knackermen provided a cheap collection service for carcass removal. Times have changed however, and today they can be difficult to locate and will charge for their services.

Incineration

Most carcasses collected by the knackerman will be rendered or incinerated. It is one of the cheapest options for disposal, though costs vary depending on area and also on the size of the horse.

Specialist cremation

This is becoming a more popular choice, though it is the most expensive option. A private cremation can be arranged so the individual ashes can be returned in a casket or scattered in a memorial garden at the pet crematorium. A vet should be able to tell you where the local pet crematorium is located. Horse owners will need to confirm in advance if they wish to have an individual cremation – this option may not be possible at short notice if the horse has been put down in an emergency.

Burial

Disposal of carcasses by burial is restricted by law and may be difficult to arrange. Horse owners needing more information should contact the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). It is worth noting that burial may incur significant costs as proper groundwork machinery is needed to dig the hole, which has to be substantial, and machinery may be needed to move the carcass. The National Rivers Authority and the environmental health department of the local authority would also need to be contacted.

Role of the horse owner

Once the decision to have a horse euthanased has been made and the arrangements confirmed, the owner will have to face the difficult decision as



to whether they would like to be with the horse when it is dispatched. If the owner feels they may be nervous or anxious, this may affect the horse's behaviour. The professionals involved will understand if the owner does not wish to stay, as it can be very distressing. Anyone who is likely to become upset, and in so doing cause distress to the horse, should say their goodbyes and then leave the animal in the capable hands of the professionals.

Insurance claims

All insurance companies will require confirmation that a horse has been euthanased and the reasons for doing so. With a 'loss of use' policy, the owner's insurance claim may be prejudiced if the horse is put down without the agreement of the insurance company. With a 'humane destruction' policy, insurers should be advised immediately, or as soon as possible. Most policies will require a veterinary certificate, and a post mortem may in a very few cases be required. In non-emergency situations it is essential to contact the insurance company in advance if the intention is to make a claim on the policy, to check that the grounds for a claim are covered.

Bereavement

Losing a horse or pony can often be equated to losing a member of the family. It is therefore very important not to underestimate the grieving process, and the strength of feelings that any owner or carer may feel once their horse has been put to sleep. It may be useful to talk to family members, or in some cases a trained counsellor who deals specifically with people suffering from grief.

The Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS) is a telephone helpline and email service that offers such support to bereaved pet owners, through a national network of trained volunteer befrienders.

Telephone: 0800 096 6606
(seven days a week
8.30am-8.30pm) Email:
pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk

Happy, healthy pets

Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at www.bluecross.org.uk

Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
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- events near you
- pets needing new homes

Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.



Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk



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