

Euthanasia

The Importance of Advanced Preparation

The decision to euthanase a horse is one of the most difficult situations faced by an owner. Aside from dealing with the emotional distress, the owner also has to handle the necessary practical arrangements.



Whilst not relieving the emotional turmoil of the event, considering and discussing the options available in advance can help to reduce distress both during, and after the procedure. Once a particular plan is decided upon, it is very useful to leave this in a written document with your yard owner or any temporary carer of your horse, so that if you are unavailable in an emergency situation, your wishes can still be respected.

Decision Making

In an emergency situation (e.g. an irreparable broken leg), the decision to euthanase your horse may need to be made quickly in the interests of welfare with little choice in the method or location. More commonly however, horses are euthanased electively following a period of deterioration due to old age, illness or injury. In these circumstances, it can be extremely difficult to decide when an end point has been reached. Essentially, quality of life is the main criterion to be considered. This can obviously be difficult to ascertain in non-verbal patients, which is what makes the decision weigh so heavily on owners. Factors to consider include demeanour, appetite, interest in interaction with you and other horses, and the ability to walk around and get up and down to sleep. It can be helpful to discuss your horse's quality of life with your vet who will be able to provide a sympathetic, informed opinion of your horse's condition, as well as practical answers to your questions.

Methods of Euthanasia

Once you have made the difficult decision to euthanase your horse, it is important to consider how would prefer it to be done. There are two methods of euthanasia commonly available for horses; by injection or using a gun. Both provide a quick, painless death for the horse and the decision of which to use is based on the owner's preference, the method of body disposal and the cost. Some owners wish to stay with the horse during the procedure whilst others do not wish to see it. This is a very personal decision. If you decide to be present during the euthanasia, for health and safety reasons, it is best if you do not hold your horse.

- Injection: a catheter is placed into a vein in the horse's neck, sometimes following light sedation. An overdose of anaesthetic is then injected into the catheter, which anaesthetises the horse before stopping the heart. This procedure can only be carried out by a veterinary surgeon. The horse generally collapses gently within 1-2 minutes of injection.
- Humane killer pistol – can be performed by a veterinary surgeon, a hunt kennel man or a licensed slaughterman if they have had the appropriate training and hold a current firearms licence. Not all vets have a firearms licence and so, if you choose this method, your regular vet may not be able to perform the euthanasia. Some horses may need prior sedation, which can only be performed by a veterinary surgeon. The pistol is placed on the horse's forehead and a shot fired after which the horse immediately collapses. A moderate amount of blood will come out of the horse's nose.



Possible Reactions

It is important to be aware that, whilst the horse will be unconscious almost instantly and so will not experience any distress or pain, some involuntary reactions can occur which may be unexpected, or distressing to the owner. These can include:

- sudden and/or uncoordinated collapse to the floor (this can be especially pronounced if a gun is used);
- twitching muscles or limb movements;
- a sudden gasp shortly after the horse has apparently stopped breathing;
- considerable blood loss from the nose and a bullet hole in the forehead if a firearm is used;
- the eyes usually remain open in death and the heart may beat for several minutes after euthanasia.

Following Euthanasia

There are several options available for the removal and management of your horse's body following euthanasia, with wide variations in cost and availability in different regions. It can be very difficult and distressing to assess these possibilities at the time of euthanasia. Additionally, the choice of removal can influence the method of euthanasia therefore it is highly recommended that you research the availability of your options so that you are prepared if you ever need to be. Your veterinary surgeon will be able to inform you of local resources. These typically consist of:

- **Cremation:** This is often a popular choice but can be expensive, particularly if ashes are returned. In more remote parts of the UK, a delay between euthanasia and collection may occur.
- **Fallen stock collector/hunt kennels:** Collection and disposal are offered at variable costs, depending on the method of euthanasia. Cost is usually much cheaper if horses are euthanased by pistol.
- **Burial:** For those who own their own land, legislation currently allows you to bury your horse, but only if your horse is kept as a pet and is not used for any business purpose. Consult DEFRA and your local council for further information and details regarding legal requirements.
- **Abattoir:** Although this is an unpopular choice with many owners, there are several abattoirs in the UK that accept horses and conform to the required welfare standards. This is the cheapest option as the abattoir usually pay a fee to the owner. Horses are euthanased by a slaughterman at the abattoir and must be sound and fit to travel. Additionally, horses must not have received recent medication or have been signed as 'not intended for slaughter for human consumption' in their passport.

Other Considerations

As well as the difficult choices of how to put your horse to sleep and the arrangements afterwards, there are several other areas to consider.

- **Insurance companies:** Most request that, where possible, they are informed before your horse is put down. Some may also require a post mortem examination in order to process a claim. It is helpful for you and your veterinary surgeon to know these details well in advance.
- **Passport:** The relevant passport issuing organisation need to be informed of your horse's death in order to maintain their records.
- **Location:** It is often recommended that the horse is put to sleep in familiar surroundings, without the stress of transport to a strange place. This can also be a good choice if your horse is closely bonded to a companion as allowing the companion to approach and smell the body afterwards may lessen their distress. If the horse is sound, it can be walked or transported to a suitable, quiet, safe area for euthanasia if preferred.
- **Staying with your horse:** As mentioned earlier, this is a matter of personal preference. As it is important for the horse to remain as calm as possible, some people prefer to nominate a friend or yard owner to be present who can be a familiar calm handler for the horse.

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