

Euthanasia: The importance of advanced preparation

The decision to euthanase a horse may be the most difficult faced by an owner.

In addition to the emotional stress, the situation is further complicated by the practical arrangements necessary. While the decision can never be made easy, considering the options available in advance can help to prevent further distress both during, and after the procedure.

It can be useful to leave a plan of your arrangements with your yard owner or temporary carer, so that if you are unavailable in an emergency situation, your wishes can still be respected.



Methods of euthanasia

Once the decision has been made to euthanase, it is important to consider the method you would prefer. There are two forms of humane destruction 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 body disposal method and the cost.

- Injection – an overdose of anaesthetic is injected into a vein in the horse's neck, which anaesthetises the horse before stopping the heart. This procedure can only be carried out by a veterinary surgeon.
- Humane killer pistol – can be performed by a veterinary surgeon, a hunt kennelman or a licensed slaughterman if they have had the appropriate training and hold a current firearms licence.

(Note: Depending on the individual horse, an injectable sedation may be given before either procedure but this can only be carried out by a veterinary surgeon.)



Making the decision

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.

However, in the non-emergency situation, the decision is often reached following a period of deterioration due to old age, illness or injury. In these circumstances, it can be very difficult to decide when an end point has been reached. It is therefore important to take time to consider the situation carefully and ensure the best decision is reached for your horse.

It can be helpful to discuss this 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.

Possible reactions

It is important to be aware that, while 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:

- a sudden and/or uncoordinated collapse to the floor – this can be especially pronounced if a gun is used;
- twitching muscles, limb movements or sudden air intake;
- considerable blood loss from the nose and bullet hole if a firearm is used;
- the eyes usually remain open in death and the heart may beat for several minutes after euthanasia.

After the procedure

There are several options available for the removal and management of your horse's body, with wide variations in cost and availability in different regions. It can be bewildering to assess these options at the time of euthanasia and the choice made can influence the method of euthanasia performed. It is therefore highly recommended that you research the possibilities so that you are prepared if you ever need to be.

- **Cremation** – This is often a popular choice but can be very expensive and in some regions there may be a significant delay in the collection of the body.
- **Fallen stock collector/hunt kennels** – Collection and disposal are offered at variable costs, depending on the method of euthanasia.
- **Abattoir** – While this is an unpopular choice with many owners, there are several abattoirs in the UK who accept horses and conform to the required welfare standards. This option is the most cost effective as they often pay a fee to the owner. Horses must be sound and fit to travel. It isn't suitable if horses have received recent medication or if their passport has been signed as 'not intended for slaughter for human consumption.'
- **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.



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 to know these details well in advance. The Passport Issuing Organisation also need to be informed of a 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 inspect the body afterwards can lessen their distress and reduce pinning. If the horse is not unsound, it can be transported to a suitable, quiet, safe area for euthanasia if preferred.
- **Staying with your horse** – This is a matter of personal preference with some owners wishing to stay while others would prefer not. 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.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you have any questions regarding the information in this factsheet, please contact your local XLVets Equine practice. Further information can also be found on the British Equine Veterinary Association (www.beva.org.uk) and World Horse Welfare website (www.worldhorsewelfare.org).



XLVets Equine is a novel and exciting initiative conceived from within the veterinary profession made up of independently owned, progressive veterinary practices located throughout the United Kingdom, members of XLVets Equine are committed to working together for the benefit of all their clients.

© XLVet UK Ltd.

No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior permission of the publisher.

For further information contact your local XLVets Equine practice:



Bishopton Equine Veterinary Services
 Ripon
 North Yorkshire
 01765 602396
www.bishoptonvets.co.uk