World Horse Welfare

Just in case

Equine end of life planning

The facts





Are you responsible for one or more horses?

Do you plan on keeping them for the rest of their life?

If so, have you thought about the decisions that will need to be made at the end of your horse's life?

And have you told anyone else what you would prefer to happen in case of an emergency?

Anyone who plans on keeping their horse for life will have to face end-of-life decisions at some point, and emergencies can happen at any time.

Planning ahead for these decisions when your horse is young and healthy, and sharing your preferences with a friend or yard manager to request they are followed if there is an emergency and you can't be contacted, helps give you peace of mind.

If the worst happened and your horse suddenly needed to be put to sleep, how many of us know what to do?

What if you are away and someone else is caring for your horse – do they know how you would like things to be handled?

What if your horse died suddenly of natural causes?

Understandably, none of us wants to think about this but by making a plan now, just in case and when we have no need for it, we could save ourselves a lot of distress.

Making a plan doesn't mean you're going to use it any time soon – but it does mean that if the worst happens, you and those caring for your horse will know what to do. Many horse owners find it helpful to complete a planning document such as our *Just in case: owner's plan.*

To help you navigate this sensitive topic, we will cover how to know when the time is right, the options for euthanasia, what happens to the horse's body, as well as other important considerations such as insurance. Understanding the different options available helps horse owners to make the right decisions at the right time for their individual horse and situation.



Making the decision

Sometimes owners might consider trying to rehome their horse if they are no longer able to keep them, either because of personal circumstances or because the horse can no longer be ridden.

Rehoming may be suitable for some horses, but unless the horse is healthy, comfortable and likely to enjoy a good quality of life, it is not always in their best interests. It is not uncommon for owners who have rehomed horses in such a situation to experience long-term worry about where the horse has ended up and whether their future needs are being met. While finding a suitable home can be the right option for some horses, older horses or those with progressive health conditions may face an uncertain future if rehomed.

For some older horses, or those with conditions that are likely to worsen over time, owners may need to consider whether euthanasia is the most compassionate option. While this can be a difficult decision, it can also provide reassurance that the horse will not face an uncertain future and that their welfare is protected.

If there is a real emergency, such as severe colic or a serious injury, you may have no choice but to have your horse put to sleep. However, most owners are faced with what is potentially an even more difficult decision – a slow decline in health and quality of life. So what does 'quality of life' actually mean? In reality, it will mean a different thing for each horse.



It's important that horse owners know their horses' preferences and what is normal for them, behaviourally and physically. Using a welfare assessment framework such as the Five Domains Model for animal welfare assessment can help horse owners understand if their horses' needs are truly being met.

Many people think of quality of life as only relevant to older horses, but in fact it applies at any age. An injury or illness causing changes which affect a horse's short and long term quality of life can happen at any time. Research from Advancing Equine Scientific Excellence (AESE) showed that a similar number of horses died aged 7-10 years as aged 26-30 years. It also found that only 1 in 8 horses die of natural causes, which means in the other 7 cases the decision to euthanise will have been planned by the owner or performed in an emergency.

It is important to remember that quality of life is a spectrum and each owner will make the decision at a slightly different point. Some assume that their vet can do this for them, but that is often not the case. If there is a clinical need for immediate euthanasia the vet should be clear with the owner about this. However, in the majority of cases there is no specific right or wrong answer, and the person best placed to decide when the time is right is usually the owner, as they know the horse best. Remember that the vet only sees each horse during visits and horses often behave differently when a vet or other professional is there. Vets can support owners when they're deciding on the right time, but ultimately in the case of a gradual decline, the final decision is likely to rest with the owner.

For owners who are worried about a horse being left on their own after their companion has been put to sleep, we are often able to help by providing a companion through our rehoming scheme. Scan the QR code below to find your perfect companion.



Because we see our horses every day, it can be incredibly difficult to spot the many tiny changes that can happen. When thinking about quality of life, you need to consider what is 'normal' for your horse.

One of the best ways to do this is to keep a diary or notes on the individual things they do that make them your horse. Do they come to greet you in the field? Do they always have a roll or a canter around when you turn them out? How do they behave with their companions? Do they lie down in the middle of the day or do they only do this in the small hours of the morning? Do they become distressed or difficult to handle if they're not worked regularly? If you keep a note of all those little things your horse does, it will be easier to spot if they stop doing them. Whilst you might not worry if one or two little things change, you might need to consider their quality of life if these start to add up.

It is also useful to take photographs and videos of your horse at fairly regular intervals so you can look back at these to see if there are any noticeable changes. This can be particularly relevant as a reminder of their condition if they struggled through the previous winter.

Making the decision to have a horse put to sleep is very difficult, but putting it off doesn't make it any easier. In situations of gradual decline, many owners later reflect that they wish they had made the decision sooner, before their horse's quality of life deteriorated further.

Euthanasia can also be surprisingly hard to discuss with friends and family. People close to you can often be almost as attached to your horse as you are. However, they probably don't spend enough time with them to notice the small changes that you see and this can make it very difficult for them to understand why you might be considering their future.

In this situation, it can be very helpful to speak to someone completely independent who can listen to your concerns and help you decide whether the time has come.

Owners are always welcome to call our Advice Line on 01953 497238 to talk things through.



Should you be there?

Although some owners feel some pressure to be there at the end, most have done what they need to do for their horse by making the decision at the right time and it really isn't necessary to be there in the final few minutes.

Horses are unaware of what is due to happen and, in most cases, will not be stressed or anxious unless they pick up on the emotions of those around them. Remember that for the horse, this is a normal day, often with extra fuss and treats, and they have no reason to anticipate anything out of the ordinary. Unless your horse is genuinely going to be affected if you're not there, think carefully about how you are likely to react. Naturally, you will be upset and in many cases the horse will pick up on this. If so, it may be better to ask an experienced person who you trust to hold your horse, or alternatively to ask the professional performing the euthanasia to bring someone with them for this purpose.

There is no need to feel guilty if you find it too distressing to be there – your horse will have no idea what is happening. However, if you feel that you must be there, make sure you know what to expect and follow any instructions that are given by the person responsible for putting the horse to sleep.

It is advisable to walk away as soon as it is over and not to be there when the horse is moved as this can be upsetting to watch.



What actually happens during euthanasia and what can I expect?

There are two key things to plan for, even though those plans might need to change when the time comes. The first is the way in which the horse is put to sleep and the second is what happens afterwards.

When deciding how to put a horse to sleep there are two options to consider. One is by injection and the other is by gun. The circumstances at the time may make the decision for you but it is important to know the facts about both options, firstly so that you can decide which is best for your horse and secondly, so that you know what to expect should the time come.

It is very important to consider which is best for the horse rather than for the owner. For example, injection may not be the best option for horses that are needle shy but may be the preferable of the two if the horse is head shy.

Understandably, what actually happens during euthanasia isn't something that owners like to think about but many people find it really helps to know what actually happens with each method, as well as what to expect. Certain things which are completely normal in this situation can be very frightening for an owner if they're not prepared.

Please note:

The following section explains what happens during the two methods of euthanasia and includes details on how horses' bodies tend to react. We include this information because we find that having a clearer understanding of what to expect is helpful for owners in a number of ways. **If you'd prefer not to read this section, please go to page 12.**





Euthanasia by injection

When a horse is put to sleep by injection, they are given an overdose of anaesthetic which will render them unconscious before they slip into a coma and die – this method of euthanasia can only be performed by a qualified vet. The vet may sedate the horse first before administering the anaesthetic drug. The anaesthetic will be given either by needle or through a catheter in the neck and the horse will then fall to the ground. The way this will happen varies: some horses will sit back on their haunches before falling onto one side; others will fall onto their side immediately; some will stagger first.

Once on the ground, the horse will be very deeply asleep, but it is common to see muscle twitching along their flanks and there can also be movement of the legs. Some will gasp, which can be a shock to the owner but the horse is deeply unconscious and not in any distress, discomfort or pain. The vet may administer a follow-up injection at this stage, although there is no need to be concerned if they don't.

The horse's eyes will open, the pupils will dilate and the eye will go glassy – the vet may touch the horse's eye gently to check for a reflex and may also use a stethoscope to check that the heart has stopped beating.



Euthanasia by gun

When a horse is put to sleep by gun, a free bullet is discharged into the brain causing instantaneous death: this can be done either by a vet or by another licensed individual.

Depending on the circumstances, a vet may administer a mild sedative first although it is not uncommon for no sedation to be used. The horse is dead the instant that the bullet is discharged – this is very important to remember as their body may continue to react in a number of ways.

Firstly, the legs will usually 'snatch' up underneath the body and the horse will drop to the floor. However, in some cases the legs will stiffen, and the horse will fall sideways or backwards. Most horses will bleed from the nose, some from the wound and some from the ears. It is fairly common for horses to sweat afterwards and there is often 'paddling' of the legs and twitching or contraction of other muscles. All of these can continue for several minutes and are part of the body's natural response.

Although the horse is dead, their heart may continue to beat for as much as ten minutes afterwards. This can be distressing for the owner but is part of the process and does not mean that the horse is still alive. As with the injection, the horse's eyes will open, the pupils will dilate and the eye will go glassy.

It is worth giving some thought to the location. Unless there are welfare reasons to the contrary, it is generally better to move the horse whilst they are alive rather than afterwards.

When deciding on the location you will also need to consider whether your horse is going to be buried or collected (see later section) as the location may need to have access for a large vehicle. If you keep your horse on a yard with other horses, try to find an outside area away from the main yard which is quiet and private. If the horse is going to be shot, remember that the noise may be upsetting for people and other horses to hear.

Remember also that some blood will be left on the ground. On an area of hard standing, you should have a hosepipe available to wash this away. On grass, you may wish to have some earth available to cover it up. If there is going to be a delay before the horse is collected, it is useful to have something available to cover them until this point, such as a rug or a tarpaulin. If the horse has a close companion, it may be helpful to give them time to see the horse afterwards and accept that they have gone. However, don't be distressed if the companion seems unconcerned by the loss of their friend as this is a very normal reaction.

Options for disposal of the horse's body

Burial

With a smaller animal such as a dog or a cat, owners are often able to bury them at home or ask their vet to arrange for a cremation. However, many horses are put to sleep at their yard so arrangements need to be made in advance, if possible. Owners with their own land often like to bury their horse at home but must check with the local authority before making arrangements. It is necessary to obtain permission for burial from the local council, as the location of water courses and other issues need to be considered. Once permission is granted, there are still certain issues to think about and regulations to follow. For example, a horse will usually need to be covered by at least 1 metre of soil and the local council can advise on this. This means that many owners will need to source a mechanical digger and operator. The person who is putting the horse to sleep must be aware that the horse is being buried as this may influence the location chosen.

Collection and disposal services

Fallen stock collectors (also known as 'knackermen') will collect horses as well as other animals. The average cost of this service is around £250 (this may vary depending on where you are located) and many will put the horse to sleep for no extra charge. Only a vet is licensed to administer medication so if a horse is put to sleep by a fallen stock collector this would be by gun. As fallen stock collectors are used regularly by farmers, they are very experienced in putting animals to sleep. Horse owners can use the National Fallen Stock Collection scheme and more information about the service is available on their website at nfsco.co.uk

Some hunt kennels will take in horses although this has declined in recent years and will depend on any medication the horse has been given. Some are able to put horses to sleep and, as with fallen stock collectors, this would be by gun. Owners would need to contact their local hunts to find out if they offer this service and what the costs are.

Remember there is a legal requirement for owners to inform the relevant passport issuing organisation in the event of any horse's death.

The legislation and regulations mentioned throughout this leaflet apply to England. Other parts of the UK are similar but please contact the relevant authority for guidance.

Cremation

Owners can have their horse cremated and a number of options are available. Most crematoriums will be able to collect the horse and offer three main services: communal cremation where the horse would be cremated as part of a group and no ashes would be returned; communal cremation with token ashes returned (this would be a small quantity of ashes from the cremation so will contain ashes from other animals cremated at the same time) or individual cremation where the horse would be cremated alone and their ashes returned to the owner.

Most crematoriums offer wooden caskets with a name plaque and many will also have the option of scattering the ashes in a memorial garden. The price of these services can range from approximately £300 for communal cremation with no ashes to around £900 for individual cremation. Options and prices will vary so you will need to contact your local pet crematorium for information. Remember that most insurance policies will not cover the full cost of even the simplest cremation. Opting for the full ashes needs consideration, as this is a significant volume and owners can be surprised at the size of the casket they require.

Keepsakes

There are many wonderful ways to commemorate much-loved horses, such as jewellery made from their mane or tail hair, memorials made from their horseshoes, teddy bears made from saddle cloths and other creative options. Many owners find it helpful to look into this in advance where possible, so they know ahead of time what steps they need to take, such as collecting some hair.



Options for euthanasia away from the horse's home

There are two main options for planned euthanasia that take place away from the horse's home.

Horse is taken to an abattoir

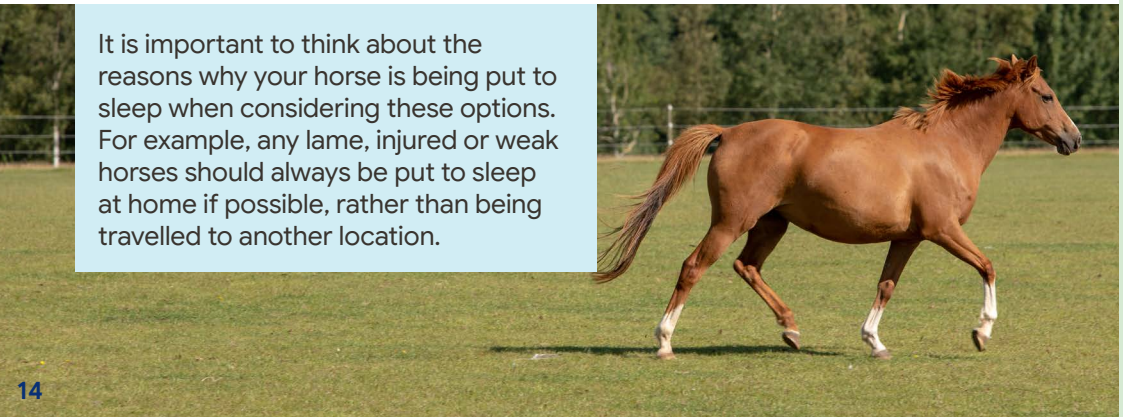
This may be suitable for some horses, provided they are fit to travel (both physically and mentally), if the abattoir is within a reasonable distance and the horse has not been excluded from the food chain (this information can be found in the horse's passport) Abattoirs are highly regulated environments with an Official Veterinarian present, and CCTV must operate in all areas where live animals are handled. In addition, anyone responsible for handling or slaughtering animals must hold a valid equine-specific Certificate of Competence.

Horse is taken to a knacker yard

Another option is for a fallen stock collector to attend and collect the horse or for the horse to be transported by their owner to a knacker yard. In these cases, the person carrying out the euthanasia must also hold a valid equine-specific Certificate of Competence. However, because the horse is not entering the human food chain, an Official Veterinarian is not required to be present at the time of death, and there is no legal requirement for CCTV. Knacker yards may accept horses that are either included in or excluded from the food chain.

Regardless of which option is chosen, owners have a responsibility to ensure that the method selected is appropriate for the individual horse and that the animal's welfare is prioritised throughout the process. It is vital that if an owner decides to send their horse away to be slaughtered or euthanised, that there is a contract in place stating that this will happen without undue delay.

It is important to think about the reasons why your horse is being put to sleep when considering these options. For example, any lame, injured or weak horses should always be put to sleep at home if possible, rather than being travelled to another location.



Euthanasia at shows or events

Should your horse be injured or become seriously ill at a show or event, the organisers should have a policy and team in place to administer veterinary treatment, including euthanasia by injection in the case of a catastrophic injury or the acute development of a life-threatening condition e.g. colic. The event organisers and veterinary team should help you arrange the collection of your horse's body from the venue.



Insurance considerations

If your horse is insured, find out exactly what the policy covers. Many policies won't cover the full cost of having the horse put to sleep and may only pay a set amount towards the cost of cremation or other options.

Many owners will have to make financial provision despite having their horse insured and it will be easier to allow for this well before the funds are required. If the horse has died suddenly or been put to sleep in an emergency, remember to contact the insurance company as soon as possible. In a non-emergency situation where it has been possible to plan ahead, the insurance company must be contacted beforehand to find out what their requirements are.

For example, some insurance companies may require a post-mortem to be carried out. Bear in mind this is likely to be at the owner's expense rather than being covered by the policy. If the decision is based on quality of life rather than being a veterinary necessity you may find that the insurance policy doesn't cover any of the costs involved. Given the importance of making this decision at the right time, it is therefore critical to make sure that money is available to fund this at any point.



Just in case: owner's plan

Whilst your horse is happy and healthy, it is a good idea to research the services available in your local area as well as all associated costs. By doing so, you will know what options you prefer and you will have all the relevant contact details to hand, even in an emergency. You can also provide a copy of the same information to whoever cares for your horse if you are away, e.g. your livery yard manager. This way you can be sure that your wishes are known.

To make this easier, World Horse Welfare has produced a *Just in case: owner's plan* which you can complete and keep with your horse's passport.

To download a copy, visit
worldhorsewelfare.org/advice/equine-end-of-life

World Horse Welfare

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