EUTHANASIA IN HORSES

Euthanasia is often an emotional and difficult topic for horse owners. The objective of this information sheet is to inform you of some of the options available and to clear up some of the myths that surround the topic.

Making the decision to have your horse euthanased is never easy, however we hope that knowing what to expect may make the process a little easier.

When is the right time?

In some emergency situations the decision may be straightforward, for example a serious colic or a catastrophic fracture. However, knowing the right time for an elective procedure can be extremely difficult – for example the very old or chronically lame horse. There is no easy answer, and the decision is often very personal. Measuring physical parameters and carrying out diagnostic tests (blood tests, x-rays etc) can help us guide you as to the severity of the horse’s condition. However, measuring quality of life is very much subjective. Each case is very different and we are always available for consultation or free advice over the phone.

Where should it be done?

The majority of people choose to have their horse euthanased at home in familiar surroundings. If the procedure is an elective one, then a large flat area with good access for a vehicle is ideal. A quiet grass area or outdoor school are preferable locations. In an emergency scenario then there is often little choice, and disposal can usually be carried out surprisingly easily by experienced ‘knackermen’, even from fairly tight spots such as stables or barns.
How is euthanasia performed?

There are 2 methods of carrying out euthanasia in the horse. Both are quick and painless, and we respect your personal choice.

1) Lethal Injection

This is performed using a large overdose of anaesthetic drugs which will cause unconsciousness and stop the heart. An intravenous sedative is usually given a few minutes prior to the injection. With modern drugs the procedure is quick and peaceful. Horses euthanased by lethal injection must not enter the food chain and should be disposed of by incineration or cremation.

2) Shooting

We are no longer allowed to carry a firearm routinely and so this method must be booked in advance and is therefore often not available in emergency scenarios. This method can also be carried out by other trained professionals such as hunt staff or knackermen. It is often preferable that the horse is sedated prior to being shot. Although the effect of shooting is instantaneous, reflex limb movement can occur for a short while afterwards. Disposal costs can sometimes be reduced although the use of intravenous sedation can still prevent the body entering the food chain, meaning disposal is still by cremation or incineration.

Should you stay with the horse whilst the procedure is carried out?

This decision is completely up to you. We understand that some people want to remain with their horse whilst the euthanasia is carried out. We will always talk you through the procedure so you are prepared for what will happen, and inform you of the safety considerations. Equally if you do not wish to be present then we fully understand this. Just inform our receptionist and we can arrange for an extra pair of hands to help the vet.

Considering companions.

When putting a horse down you may want to consider the needs of companions or other horses on the same premises. Horses usually accept the loss of their companions well. However, a particularly close companion can become distressed at the loss of their friend. In such cases we would advise letting the companion see the horse for a few minutes after euthanasia, or even leaving them in the same paddock for a short while. Sedative or anti-anxiety drugs can be prescribed for the companion if necessary for the subsequent hours or days. Please feel free to discuss these issues with us and we will do our best to help and advise.
**Arranging for collection and disposal.**

When you make the appointment to have your horse euthanased, we can arrange for the knackerman to come and collect your horse at the same time. In the emergency situation we are lucky to have the use of several very professional knackerman in our area who are usually able to come and collect horses at short notice.

If your horse has been given any drugs, not only the lethal injection but also any sedation or painkillers, then the body will need to be incinerated or cremated and not enter the food chain or be fed to hounds. It is possible for horses to be buried in the UK, as horses can be classified as pets rather than livestock. However you must contact your local authority to obtain permission before burying a horse. They will advise you on the stipulations that must be followed with regards to the burial site.

Horse owners can apply to join the National Fallen Stock scheme that will give them access to the national database of registered fallen stock operators (www.nfesco.co.uk).

You can choose to pay for an individual cremation and have the ashes returned to you in a commemorative box. However, this does represent a considerable expense and will often more than double the cost of standard incineration.

If you need the services of a collection and disposal operator, or require an individual cremation, please feel free to contact our office. We can either arrange an appointment on your behalf or give you the details of the operators we recommend.

**Is your horse insured?**

Issues regarding insurance claims for mortality can be complex. If you have an insurance policy that provides cover for the death of your horse then you need to make sure that you comply with the terms of your policy.

Most insurance companies will require that the BEVA (British Equine Veterinary Association) guidelines have been followed in order to cover for the death itself. This does not affect any claims for previous veterinary treatment relating to the same condition, but purely relates to recovering the value of your horse. The BEVA guidelines mean that the injury or illness has to be so severe as to ‘warrant immediate destruction’ in order to satisfy a mortality insurance claim. It may then be necessary for a post mortem examination to be carried out in order to provide additional evidence for the insurance company. In less urgent cases, the insurance company must be contacted first, and the opinion of a second veterinary surgeon may be required.

If you do not comply with the conditions set out by the insurance company, they are very unlikely to pay your claim. If your horse has already been euthanased and the body removed, it will be too late to provide the insurance company with the facts needed for a claim. If any doubt, contact your own insurance company for clarification or feel free to contact our office and speak to one of the vets.
Costs of euthanasia.

Wessex Equine fee for euthanasia (all inclusive price, includes sedation and cost of lethal injection): £132.00 excl VAT.

Average cost of removal and incineration: £250

Average cost of individual cremation with return of ashes: £600

(NB prices are estimates only and subject to change, prices vary according to the disposal company used)