

Euthanasia

As a horse owner, it is a sad truth that a time will come where you may have to make the decision to end their life. This could be from a degenerative disease, a long-term illness, dangerous behavioural issues or an accident. Welfare of your animal is the most important thing, and assessments should be made if the horse is suffering, and quality of life is no longer acceptable. Although it is a difficult thought, it is important to understand the options and have a plan in place to make the situation a little easier and know where to turn for support. There are two main things to consider when planning for euthanasia. The first being the method to put your horse to sleep, and secondly what happens to your horse's body after this.

What happens?

There are two main methods of euthanasia. The first being a lethal injection administered by your veterinary surgeon, and the second a gun used by a licensed firearms holder.

Sometimes the method of euthanasia is dictated by emergency circumstances but if possible, choose the method which is best for you and your horse. Lethal injection is when an overdose of anaesthetic is injected into the vein and the horse becomes unconscious before passing away. Usually, the horse is standing whilst injected therefore the horse will fall to the ground, which can be alarming for owner. It is important to understand the horse is unconscious at this point and is not aware of what is happening. Sometimes reflexes are displayed which include gasping, muscle twitching, leg/tail movements. The horse is not in discomfort or distress at this point, but it is important to be prepared for this incident. The veterinary surgeon might check the horse's heart has stopped beating with a stethoscope and touch their eye to check for a corneal reflex.

If you choose being shot for your horse or pony, a veterinary surgeon or other licensed fire-arm holder will fire a bullet into the brain causing instant death. At Abbey Equine Clinic we do not offer this service but are able to put you in contact with someone suitable. Just like the lethal injection, the horse will fall to the ground and reflexes can be displayed even though the horse has passed away. It is a natural response of the horse's body and there is no need to worry and occasionally the horse may have a nosebleed which can be distressing to see. Planning a euthanasia location is a good idea and should be considered dependant on if you want your horse's body collected or buried. It's a good idea to have your horse put to sleep near the location of the burial site or with easy vehicle access. Usually, movement of your horse is easier whilst alive, than afterwards unless there is a reason they cannot be moved.



What next?

There are a few ways to dispose of your horse's body which include burial, cremation, fallen stock collector and hunt kennel collection. It is important to understand what these mean so you can make the best decision for yourself.

- Burial is allowed if the horse is a pet, and you must get the landowners permission. On top of that, the local authority must have granted permission for you to do so as there are regulations in place on this matter. It is important you let the person putting your horse to sleep be aware of your plans and you will need to organise a mechanical digger to assist. This may be difficult if the ground is frozen.
- Many firms offer pet cremation services including collection and offer individual cremation, where your horse's ashes are returned to you or group cremation where you do not get returned ashes. Please contact the practice for recommended pet cremation companies and be aware of the cost of this choice.
- Fallen stock collectors will come to your location and collect your horse's body for disposal. Please contact the practice for local collectors.
- Many hunts offer euthanasia by gun followed by collection of your horse's body. Look online at www.mfha.org.uk to find your nearest hunt or contact the practice.

Should you be present?

It is entirely your choice and there is no right or wrong answer to this question. Sometimes owners want to spend the final moments with their animals, but it is important to remember that the horse will be in the hands of a professional who has dealt with euthanasia frequently. It can be a distressing time therefore it is completely understandable to not be present.

Insurance?

If your horse is insured and you intend to make a claim related to the euthanasia it is strongly recommended you contact the insurance company first, unless this will increase the suffering of your horse. Insurance companies have a strict definition of "destruction on humane grounds" and often do not cover euthanasia, even when it is humane to do so. British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) have brought out guidelines for euthanasia in conclusion with insurance which is worth researching or speak to your veterinary surgeon for more information.

Other Reading

There are many online leaflets and support systems in place if you would like more information including:

- The Blue Cross
- World horse welfare
- The British Horse Society

The staff at Abbey Equine Centre are available to discuss the euthanasia options available and supply contact details for services if you wish to telephone or visit the practice.

