



Equine end of life and euthanasia

Equine euthanasia can be somewhat of a taboo subject but in reality, animal owners should think about having to make this inevitable decision very early during ownership. Although we hope our equine friends are going to live for years and years, sadly, this is not always the case. Below we discuss the main points and considerations owners should be aware of regarding equine euthanasia.

What is euthanasia?

The word euthanasia derives from the Greek language meaning 'good death' and is described by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons¹ as the 'painless killing to relieve suffering.'

Euthanasia can often also be referred to as 'put down' or 'put to sleep' however, in some cases, this can lead to confusion. At Bransby Horses, we prefer to use the terms 'end of life' or 'euthanasia.'

Why do we need to consider euthanasia?

Research has shown that only 12.5% (1 in 8) equines die of natural causes², which indicates that a majority of equine owners will face making the decision to have their equine euthanised at some point or another. The health status of the equine, the equine's quality of life and also the owner's circumstances, amongst a number

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of other factors will all impact the decision making prior to euthanasia. However, it's important to remember that an end of life decision is not solely made for elderly equines. Injury, accident or emergency, such as colic can occur at any time during an equine's lifetime, which can leave euthanasia as the most appropriate treatment option. Although a vet cannot make the decision for you, it is important to discuss your circumstances with them and explore all options available to ensure you are making an informed and appropriate decision.

Reasons for euthanasia?

It would never be possible to generate a profile of all the reasons for euthanasia, every equine and situation is different, but some of the main reasons are explored below:

Accident or Emergency: In the event of an accident or emergency (such as colic or serious injury) to prevent the equine from enduring extreme pain and suffering, where the prognosis for successful recovery is unlikely.

Quality of Life: An equine's quality of life can be difficult to assess, particularly when you're the only person that sees him/her every day; it can therefore be useful to make this initial assessment with either a knowledgeable friend or professional. Remember, it's not only aged horses that may be euthanised due to their quality of life – health issues can occur at any stage in life.

Although not an exhaustive list, below are some of the key factors to consider when assessing quality of life:

- Is the horse content? Does the horse interact with other horses or with people?
- Is the horse's general health good and are they pain free?
- Can the horse move freely and demonstrate a 'normal' gait?
- Can the horse lay down and get back up easily and without assistance?
- Is the horse gaining enough nutrition (both from feedstuffs and water) to maintain a healthy bodyweight?

Before making any decisions on quality of life, we recommend talking to your vet, family and

experienced friends to ensure all areas have been considered. As the owner, you know your equine best and this will help when making suitable decisions.

Owner's Circumstance: This can cover a number of reasons such as a change in family circumstances, if it's not possible to rehome the equine into a suitable environment due to age or long-term conditions e.g. lameness, or lack of appropriate finances for surgery/medication or the ongoing costs after expensive treatments have been paid for.

Behavioural: In extreme cases, where the equine can be dangerous to either handle or exercise, euthanasia may be considered for those equines whose behavioural issues cannot be solved after being explored by vets, behaviourists and any other professionals deemed necessary. This will safeguard the equine's future and prevent them from being passed into inexperienced hands.

Planning ahead

Making the decision to euthanise can be very stressful and is understandably, a very emotional time for an equine owner. By planning in advance and knowing your preferred method, the location and what will happen with the equine afterwards can ensure that a highly emotional and distressing time is made somewhat less difficult. Sharing this plan with your livery manager, or those looking after your equine if you're on holiday can help if the situation arrives whilst you're away.

Methods

There are two methods for the humane euthanasia of equines utilised in this country, both of which are quick and painless. The

first is the lethal injection and the second, is via the free-bullet. Both methods have their differences but many owners will have a personal preference for one or the other. Certain situations such as an emergency can dictate which method is most appropriate.

Lethal Injection: This can ONLY be administered via a veterinarian and does restrict the options available when considering body removal as the drugs used cannot enter the human food-chain via animal production. A vet will usually sedate the equine before administering an overdose of an anaesthetic drug which is delivered intravenously either via a needle or via a catheter.

Shortly after the dose is given, the equine will fall unconscious before slowly falling to the ground. The way in which they fall can be somewhat unpredictable, and both the vet and handler's safety should remain of paramount importance. Once the equine has fallen, a second dose of drugs is administered if required. The vet will monitor the equine's pulse until the heart has stopped which can take a few more minutes before testing reflexes in the eye to ensure the equine has passed successfully.

During this time, there may be some involuntary muscle twitches and/or leg movements and occasionally, it may sound as if the equine gasps. These are all involuntary responses to the process and it is important to remember that the equine is unconscious during this time and is unaware of what is happening. These responses can be distressing for the owner to see, but knowing that these are possible can make them a little easier to deal with.

Free-bullet: This can only be carried out by a veterinarian or a trained marksman with a valid license. A suitably loaded firearm will be placed at the centre of the equine's head just above eye-level before firing; the horse will fall to the floor quickly

and often unpredictably. As with the lethal injection, similar involuntary responses may be observed and it is likely blood will be seen coming from the nose and/or the entry site – again this can be distressing for the owner, but being prepared can minimise the impact.

Although the equine's heart may continue to beat for a short period after, it is important to remember that the equine is dead as soon as the bullet has been discharged. Euthanasia via free-bullet is usually a more cost-effective alternative than via the lethal injection which can be expensive due to needing to cover the vet's time, the drugs and the equipment utilised. Carcass removal from a Knackerman or Fallen Stock Operative is usually competitively priced, whereas an abattoir may even pay the owner. Cremation can be expensive depending on the option chosen; group cremation is a more cost-effective option to individual cremation, which could cost up to £1,000.

Location

Many people may overlook this during a planned euthanasia, but by considering this right at the beginning of the process it can make things a little easier. In an emergency situation, the location cannot always be changed without detriment to the equine, but it is something to be mindful of.

The plans for the body after the equine has been euthanised can play an important factor when deciding upon a location for the procedure. Consider if vehicular access will be required for removal, or if the site is visible by the public eye. When using the free-bullet it is advisable to choose a location away from other animals. A soft-landing surface is preferable but the site also needs to be free from any hazards that could cause complications or effect the health and safety of both the animal and handlers. If the body is to be buried, having the equine euthanised close to this location will make the following step easier.

Having an equine euthanised is a difficult decision and it will often leave owners distressed

Carcass removal

There are a number of options available for removal, however, these can sometimes be affected by the method and location of the euthanasia. The logistical implications of this process can be a little undesirable and it is often advisable for the owner not to be present during this stage.

Cremation: Not all pet crematoriums will be able to facilitate equines and those that do, will offer varying services. Some may only collect the equine once the euthanasia has taken place, whereas others may be able to offer the full service. Services usually include group cremation (which incurs lower fees than individual cremation) and individual or private cremation, which allows the equine's ashes to be returned should the owner wish to have them.

National Fallen Stock Company/ Knackerman: The National Fallen Stock Company or NFSC is a not-for-profit organisation run for

the benefit of its members. The NFSC aims to balance finding a regulated and professional service nationwide at an affordable price to the consumer. By contacting them through their website <http://www.nfsc.co.uk> owners will be advised of the recommended operators within their local area and the services provided.

Hunting Kennels:

Although the number of local hunts offering euthanasia and collection/disposal services is in decline, some still offer these services depending on the medications that the equine may have been exposed too. For further information, owners should liaise directly with their local hunt(s).

Burial: Equine burial is possible provided you have your own land and you have sought permission

and approval from your local Trading Standards Office and the Environment Agency. They will also be able to advise you on the regulations that go alongside burying an equine, such as the proximity to a watercourse and also the depth of the grave. Currently legislation indicates that in England, any equine can be buried, however, within Scotland and Wales only pet equines can be buried and those used for commercial purposes cannot be buried³. It is also necessary to consider the size of the grave needed, and the tools/machinery that would be required to facilitate this.

Remembering you're not alone and that there is support there if you need it, can be a great comfort

Abattoir: Abattoirs that handle equines can be few and far between but can be an economical way to euthanise an equine, as the owner may receive payment for their horse, as there is often no cost for this to the owner. To be accepted by an abattoir, the equine must be fit to travel to the



destination – ruling out emergency cases and those with painful conditions/injuries.

Other considerations

Owner Presence: Ultimately this is a decision that only the owner can make. Having an equine euthanised is a difficult decision to have to make and it will often leave owners distressed and very emotional. There is no shame in not being present and neither should the owner feel guilty. Each person is different and some may want to be there right up until the end, but others will not. If you are unsure of how you will react or know that you do not want to be present, having an experienced friend who can be available to assist/hold the equine during the process can be useful.

Most professional companies will also be able to bring an assistant should they need too, so discuss this with them beforehand to avoid any issues. It's recommended that the owner isn't present when the body is removed as this can be unpleasant.

Companion Presence: If an equine has a very strong bond, provided the circumstances allow, it can sometimes be advisable to allow the companion some time with the body after the euthanasia to come to terms with the death. Donkeys bond very strongly and are at high risk of developing health conditions such as Hyperlipemia, after the loss of their companion. Giving donkeys this time can reduce risks such as these.

Passport: Notifying the Passport Issuing Office (PIO) is required by law and the passport must be returned to the PIO within 30 days of an equine's death. Upon request, the passport can often be returned

to the owner as a keepsake.

Keepsakes: Many owners like to keep something to remember their equine by, such as mane or tail hair or their shoes; which can be utilised by companies to create wonderful keepsakes such as jewellery. At the time, collecting these things can often be overlooked, so taking these in advanced or having someone do this for you can help.

Costs and the Implications of

Insurance: The costs of having an equine euthanised can vary greatly, depending on the method chosen. The professional organisation carrying out the procedure, how and whom removes the body and finally what happens with the body after removal.

Owners who have their equines insured will need to refer to their policy details to determine any requirements needed in the event of euthanasia, for example, a post mortem might be required before a claim can be settled. Some insurance companies will cover the cost of euthanasia when deemed a medical necessity (rather than considering the equine's quality of life), whereas others will not. Therefore, it's important to check the small-print of your policy and have the financial reserves to cover the costs of your chosen particulars yourself, if the situation arises. Although the cost or the role of an insurance company should never impact the decision to euthanise, it should be considered so the owner is prepared for every possibility.

Grief and Bereavement

Losing an equine can be very difficult and grieving is perfectly normal, but it may help to talk to friends, family or a specialist counsellor from one of the dedicated pet bereavement services available. Grief affects

everyone in a different way, but however you feel, remembering you're not alone and that there is support there if you need it, can be a great comfort at a particularly distressing time.



Blue Cross Pet

Bereavement Services: If you have lost, or are facing saying goodbye to, a much-loved pet and need somebody to talk to, the Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service is here for you every day from 8.30am – 8.30pm. Please contact 0800 096 6606 or email pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk



'Friends at the End' is a BHS initiative designed to make sure that no horse owner has to face the loss

of their equine companion alone. The BHS HQ based team and over 60 trained BHS Friend volunteers can provide confidential advice about questions owners may have surrounding euthanasia, or support if they are struggling with the loss of their equine companion. Please contact friendsattheend@bhs.org.uk or 02476 840517 to receive support via phone, email or face to face.

If you need any further information regarding Equine End of Life, Euthanasia or Quality of Life, please do not hesitate to get in contact with us below.

References:

- 1 Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. (2019).
- 2 Research conducted by the Advancing Equine Scientific Excellence. (2017).
- 3 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs and Animal and Plant Health Agency. (2012).