

# EQUISEARCH

For People Who Love Horses

## Euthanasia: Let's Talk it Over

It's wise to create a "road map" ahead of time – one to guide us when we're faced with the painful prospect of putting our horses to sleep.

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We often receive inquiries about euthanasia; too many to dismiss them as morbid curiosity. Horse owners often display a full gamut of philosophies and game plans. Some plan to let their horse "die peacefully in pasture, of natural causes." Others don't want to even think about it.

Those who examine the subject critically ahead of time come to the inevitable conclusion that our horses will die someday, and realize that, realistically, it's unlikely they all will die peacefully in a pasture and make the scenario more bearable for us. While the planning may be somewhat painful, it is a good thing for everyone involved – including your horse – to make those decisions in advance.

One of the most basic is what to do with your horse's body. It's far easier to know ahead of time who to call and what it will cost than it is to frantically try to find someone last minute. You will need to know in advance whether you can bury the horse and who can help dig the hole or where you can have him cremated and how he will be transported to that facility or if you will have his body picked up for disposal. Your local laws may come into play, so it's not something to tackle when you're highly emotional. Once you've made those choices, you can tuck the information away for when you're ready.

In this article, we will help you understand how to make the decision for your horse and explain what happens to the horse physically at the time of death.

### A Philosophical Conundrum

Putting our horse to sleep is perhaps the single greatest difficulty we may face as horse owners. It can really be a mind-bender and heart breaker. We go to great lengths, expense, and effort to preserve our horses (vet care, blanketing, supplements, etc.), so of course it feels "inside out" to force an end to their lives.

However, by the nature of our physiology verses theirs, most of us will outlive our horses. Despite this knowledge, we all try to find a way off the roller coaster when our horses are near death. Our circuits become overloaded as the left brain battles the right in the midst of emotion, confusion, and the unbearable stress of the ticking clock. We feel like we're climbing the first big incline of the roller coaster ride . . .

We know what is going to happen.

We can see it coming.

And we cannot stop it.

So, the question is not *will* it occur; it is *how* and sometimes *when* it will occur.

Ultimately we must do what is best for our horses, so we must navigate the situation to minimize the "what ifs" that we may haunt us if we make a decision in haste, without clear thought. There are no second chances here. Quite the cat's cradle - so, how do we find our way through it?

## A Swift Cut with a Sharp Blade

We are all aware that colic is the leading cause of death in domestic horses. It can happen to any horse, at any time, at any age. Perhaps it is the most familiar scenario that horse enthusiasts envision when they broach the topic of euthanasia. In a way, owners who lose their horse to a sudden colic suffer the lesser of two evils compared to other scenarios. Colic comes on fast and in a matter of hours your companion can be gone. Horrific as it is, it may be less painful than watching your horse fail to thrive over time, knowing a plan for euthanasia must be made.

The contrast between the scenarios is like the difference between a swift cut with a sharp blade, or a dull edge dragging slowly across the skin. In scenarios such as colic, you are more likely to feel more turmoil for leaving your horse alive than for euthanizing him, since he will be subject to extreme pain and a prolonged death if you do. In this case, euthanasia clearly becomes the logical option to tilt the scale toward your left brain's point of view. Now on to the more difficult situation.

## A Slow Cut with a Dull Edge

In this scenario, you, as the conservator of the horse, must wrestle with the slow pain of knowing that the time is coming to put the horse to sleep ... like a freight train on the horizon. The most common examples include chronic laminitis or debilitating arthritis. In these instances, the body can and will continue to function despite an ongoing painful condition.

This is a sharp contrast to colic in which the horse will die anyway in a matter of hours if you do not make the decision for him. Arguably, the decision involving something like chronic laminitis is the more excruciating of the two scenarios. In this situation, every option presents with its own set of stand-offs between emotion and logic.

On one hand, we become concerned that we are "playing God" and giving up on our beloved horses by choosing to end their life humanely. But, on the other hand, if we do not euthanize, they will face a slow and painful demise. Of course, we always leave room for our own fears and selfish desire to keep them alive because of what they provide for us. In this scenario, the answers may not be as obvious as the colic situation.

## Knowing When to Say When

So how ... and when do we decide to euthanize? There are no clear answers that can be applied to every situation, but these thoughts may help:

- 1) Each case must be considered on an individual basis, between the veterinarian (if you include us) and the owner.** Critical factors vary from case to case: the horse's age, money, divorce, moving, sickness (of owner or horse), and other physical factors. They are *all* fair game and no criteria should be dismissed even if they appear on the surface to be shallow. What may be the best decision for one horse may not necessarily be the best decision for another horse, even though their circumstances may appear to be similar.
- 2) Your veterinarian must share in the agreement to euthanize your horse,** so you must be prepared to hear his or her opinion too. If there is an alternative, or if you are not considering all of the possible options, the veterinarian may challenge you firmly. Ultimately, the veterinarian must adhere to an ethical oath when euthanizing animals. Unless you intend to humanely euthanize your horse yourself, you must discuss your decision with your vet in order for him or her to ethically be able to perform the procedure.
- 3) Consider quality of life over quantity of life.** This is just one opinion, but horses do not appear to stake too much claim in the future or in the past. They live in the moment. Perhaps being prey animals makes them acutely aware that life is unpredictable and finite? It just seems logical that horses may be interested in living a less-painful life (even if it is shorter), rather than a longer uncomfortable one.
- 4) But how much pain is too much?** Let's face it, we all live with pain. Some of us more than others. But that does not mean that we want to die because of the pain. So how can we figure out when and where to draw the line?

Here are some criteria to ponder:

What do they appear to care about on a day-to-day basis? No ... not the riding, not the medals and ribbons ... they use far more basic things to define the quality of their existence. Although these criteria may seem overly simplified, horses need to be able to run, buck, lie down, roll, sleep, eat, drink and keep up with the herd in order to be, well, horses.

They use these behaviors to make their impression on life and to show their joie de vie. As those abilities diminish, so does the spark of life in the animal. Over time, as the horse is able to do fewer of these activities, living gives way to existing, and your horse can be left a mere fraction of what he once was, trapped in a shell of a broken body. Almost like a roaring fire reduced down to a smoldering ash.

Pain and PAIN. Determining the nature and extent of pain can go a long way toward deciding how to plan for an ailing horse. For instance, is this pain something that the horse has to get through in order to then have a reasonable quality of life? If someone said to you, "OK, for the next month you are going to hurt badly, but then for the following 10 years, life will be good," you may decide that it is worth the turbulence. But if someone says, "This pain will never go away, and it is only going to get worse," your long-term plan could be drastically different. Remember, horses cannot tell us how much pain they are in, nor can they distract themselves with things like television, magazines, or talking to friends. They have to just stand there - and ache.

Veterinary guidance cannot only help owners mitigate on behalf of their horses, but also can make decisions easier by giving an owner a realistic picture of what their horse is facing. Sometimes, something simple and relatively inexpensive (such as a daily Previcox or pergolide tablet) can provide a viable option. Remember, there is a difference between living with pain and living in pain. If you suspect that your horse is spending more than 30 seconds out of every minute preoccupied with pain, it is time to think seriously about intervention - whether it be management changes, medications, or euthanasia.

### **The Decision is Made, Now What?**

Only after all mental and emotional exercises are tediously exhausted, and all roads lead back to the same destination, can we move on to planning the euthanasia.

It is perfectly natural to feel intense anxiety over the euthanasia itself. Not only have we all heard horror stories about euthanasia gone wrong, but we fundamentally are concerned about whether or not the horse senses fear or feels pain during the procedure. Try to go easy on yourself here.

We know quite a bit from science and medicine that death by lethal injection is minimally invasive and instant in most cases. The euthanasia procedure is quite simple. The veterinarian usually sedates the horse first and then injects a lethal dose of barbiturate into the jugular vein. The barbiturate disseminates rapidly in the blood and induces unconsciousness within about 30 seconds. At this point the horse will fall to the ground.

Keep in mind that during the fall, the horse is semi-conscious or completely unconscious so he is not sensing much at this point. This has been confirmed by electroencephalogram (EEG) brain activity studies. From the point of landing on the ground, he simply feels like he is falling asleep. The barbiturate then induces both respiratory and cardiac arrest (meaning that the heart and lungs cease to expand and contract). Without circulation or oxygen, the body discontinues after a mere minute. Oftentimes, horses will take one large breath just before they expire. Throughout this process, the horse is not aware of stimuli - so again, no pain.

The veterinarian will touch the horse's eyeball to test for a corneal reflex. If any brain activity is present, the horse will blink when his cornea is touched. Once blinking ceases (usually within 1 to 2 minutes), the horse is declared brain dead. It is not uncommon for the body to twitch and move for several minutes (sometimes up to an hour) after death. Do not worry. The horse is not alive. This is just residual electrical activity in the body. Also, be prepared that the eyes will not close when the horse passes.

### **Bottom Line**

The word *euthanasia* literally means "kind passing." It is a peaceful, painless end to life. It can be planned out well - so that everyone has said their goodbyes, and the horse can transition out of this world in a peaceful circle of love (with a full belly) and his dignity, grace, and majesty intact. It can truly be one final gift that you give your friend ... to let him leave this world on a good day, without too much fear or pain.

As a practicing veterinarian of over 10 years, I cannot help but notice that each owner seems to know when that time is right for his or her horse. My interpretation of that is this: If you are pondering the decision of euthanasia frequently, the time is getting close. Nobody knows your horse better than you. All we can do as veterinarians is offer advice based on our medical knowledge of your horse and on our experience.

In the moments leading up to your horse's passing, try to think of your best time together. Emanate and send this positive energy on with him. He needs your support at this crucial moment. You have the rest of your life to cry and fall to pieces, but the moment of euthanasia is his moment, so do your best to assist him through it with positive energy and loving guidance.

Finally, I want you to know that I have never had an owner tell me that they made the decision to euthanize their horse too soon. On the contrary, I have had several tell me that they regret waiting too long. I hope that this article in some way helps you navigate the mental and emotional exercise needed to comprehend your decision.

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