

## **Humane Destruction**

Owning a horse, pony or donkey can be very rewarding but also carries with it many responsibilities: one of the most important of these is being prepared to arrange the humane destruction of your animal should the unfortunate situation arise. It is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly and every horse owner should give the matter their full consideration, though hopefully they will never have to put such arrangements into practice.

This leaflet is designed to provide information to those owners who are faced with the distressing, but often inevitable, situation of having to have their animal put-down.

### **The horse's welfare must always come first**

The long-term interests and welfare of the horse must outweigh every other consideration. There are many reasons why a horse may have to be put-down (for example: serious injury, illness, permanent unsoundness or old age) but, whatever the circumstances, the decision should always be made in the best interests of the horse.

Face facts calmly and with the determination to do the best possible for the animal. Though it is a subject which many owners would rather not think about, every horse owner should be fully informed about the methods and welfare considerations of having a horse put-down in order to prevent the horse suffering unnecessary pain and distress.

The British Horse Society Welfare Department can provide sympathetic advice and support for horse owners regarding humane destruction. (All staff are practical horse-keepers and have themselves experienced the trauma of having a horse put-down.). Details of useful contacts and further information are also available. Contact: The British Horse Society - Welfare Department on 08701 29 99 92

### **When may a horse have to be put-down?**

Serious injury, terminal illness or chronic conditions. Where, in the opinion of a veterinary surgeon, a horse will not respond to treatment for any serious injury or condition involving significant pain, or where a horse is in such a condition that it would be cruel to keep it alive, the animal must be destroyed humanely, without unreasonable delay.

Permanent unsoundness or progressively degenerative conditions. In a non-emergency situation, where a horse is permanently unsound, or has a recurring or progressively degenerative condition, a rational decision must be made, with due regard for the horse's future and welfare.

End of usefulness or old age. When a horse reaches the end of its active working life, or is elderly, consideration must be given to whether the horse can be provided with a good quality of life in retirement\*\* or whether it would be kinder to have the horse painlessly destroyed.

## **Having your horse put-down.**

If possible, the horse should be put-down in familiar surroundings. In a non-emergency situation, e.g. an elderly horse, it is usually kinder to keep the animal in familiar surroundings, whilst it is dispatched.

Never move unnecessarily a severely injured animal or remove a suffering horse from his normal surroundings. In an emergency a horse may need to be put down immediately; this could mean humane destruction on site by a veterinary surgeon, a knackerman or hunt kennel man. Under no circumstances permit a horse with a broken limb to be transported live to a slaughter house.

There may be reasons why it is not possible to have a horse destroyed at home. In such circumstances, if the horse is fit to travel, it should be taken to a local licensed horse slaughter house, or arrangements made for its collection by a local knackerman or hunt kennel man.

Horses should never be taken away alive without supervision. In the case of an old but not in pain horse that has to travel to the slaughter house, it must be accompanied either by yourself or send a trusted friend, and always wait until the horse has been destroyed. (in some abattoirs appointments can be made.)

Do not panic or allow natural emotion to affect your horse. Either stand by the animal yourself, or get a reliable friend to keep him calm and confident, distract him with food or titbits if necessary.

Follow exactly the advice and instructions from the expert. Your vet will be able to advise you on both the despatch of your horse and disposal of the carcass.

## **Methods of Humane Destruction**

Never allow anyone inexperienced or untrained to attempt destruction, even to avoid delay. Horses may be destroyed only by a veterinary surgeon (using lethal injection or by shooting) or by persons who are trained in doing so, such as a knackerman or hunt kennel man (both by shooting only). Accept the advice of the expert regarding the most appropriate method of humane destruction. Do not try to influence the person in charge or over-ride their decision, or create problems and distress for your horse by demanding injections or dope, except on veterinary advice.

1. The use of the humane killer or free-bullet pistol is the most usual method of destruction. The barrel of the gun is placed against the horse's forehead and bullet is discharged into the brain. The horse is killed immediately and falls to the ground. There is a likely to be some bleeding from the bullet hole and nose. Occasionally, there may be some involuntary movements of the limbs but, generally, the body is still. This method is instant and totally painless. The horse does not hear, see or feel anything but, by it's nature, this method may be distressing to witness. It is economical and does not affect the carcass which would otherwise limit the options for disposal.
2. Humane destruction by lethal injection may be preferable in certain circumstances. This method of destruction can be carried out only by a veterinary surgeon. A lethal overdose of anaesthetic drugs is injected intravenously (usually via the jugular vein). The horse may first be injected with a sedative. The method is generally quiet and painless and, with modern drugs, is almost instantaneous. The horse usually collapses slowly and some may try to counter the effects of the injection. This procedure may be

upsetting to witness. The horse is likely to twitch for a few minutes after it has died, but this merely due to relaxation of the muscles. For your own peace of mind it may be advisable to ask your vet to stay until the twitching has ceased.

The options for disposal are limited following humane destruction by lethal injection. If this method is used, residues of euthanasing agents remain in the tissues rendering the carcass unfit for human or pet consumption. Disposal will be, therefore, more expensive.

### **Insurance Claims**

In all but emergency situations, contact your insurance company prior to humane destruction of the insured animal. Always check your insurance policy to see what eventualities you are covered for. Where valid, your insurance company will be able to advise you on the procedure and documentation required in order that you can make a claim.

### **Options for disposal**

It is important to be practical and realistic about the methods of disposal. There are various options for disposal of the carcass depending on the individual circumstances, method humane destruction used and locality.

**EC Approved Slaughter House** - These yards take horses, the meat of which is to be sold for human consumption. Horses must be despatched on the slaughter house premises and a payment will be made based on the meat value of the animal. Horses must be fit to travel; they can't accept anything that is down or that has been treated with any chemicals/drugs within a designated period prior to slaughter (Your vet will be able to advise you regarding drug withdrawal periods). Contact your Local Authority or the Yellow Pages for details.

**Knacker Yards** - These yards produce meat for pet food but not for human consumption and dispose of carcasses that are not fit for use. Horses or carcasses can be collected or the horse despatched at home and taken away. Knacker yards also do cremation (incineration) but make a greater charge for this service.

**Hunt Kennels or Zoological Parks** - There may be kennels and parks locally that require meat for animal consumption. Your Local Authority may be able to provide details.

**Specialist Cremation** - There are several centres with facilities for cremation of all types of pets and equines. Some centres will collect the carcass (for a fee), others require the owner to arrange delivery to the crematorium. There are a range of services offered, from return of casketed ashes to their interment in a garden of remembrance. Cremation is expensive, although cheaper incineration options are available (see also Knacker Yards).

**Burial** - If a horse dies or is despatched on its owner's land it may be possible to bury it there. This is often impractical and is restricted, by law, to specific sites. The Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) will be able to provide further details; the National Rivers Authority and your Local Authority Environmental Health Department will also need to be contacted. From a practical point of view, excavation and moving the carcass for burial requires heavy machinery and may disrupt a considerable area of ground.

## **Coping with the loss**

Do not be afraid or embarrassed to seek support or counselling to help you come to terms with your loss. Losing a horse or pony is often as devastating as the loss of a member of the family and can take along time to come to terms with. If necessary, details on bereavement counselling can be obtained by contacting your local Citizens' Advice Bureau.

It is important to appreciate that the options for retiring horses to rest homes are dwindling, with many centres only taking cruelty or neglect cases. The few rest homes that do cater for old and retired animals, are generate full to capacity and, therefore, it is kinder to have your horse put-down than for it to face an uncertain future. A BHS Welfare publication entitled 'Caring for Old and Retired Horses' is available free of charge on receipt of a S.A.E. from the British Horse Society Welfare Department.

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