

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



EUTHANASIA



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

The word 'euthanasia' has Greek origins: 'eu' means 'good' and 'thanatos' means 'death'.

The aim of euthanasia is to provide a swift, painless death for our animals in order to end any unnecessary suffering. Euthanasia can be referred to in many ways, for example 'put down', 'put to sleep' and 'destroy'.



When is euthanasia necessary?

The quality of your horse's life should always be your highest priority. When horses become very old or ill, their quality of life deteriorates and it is understandable to want to protect your horse from pain or suffering. Euthanasia should be considered if your horse:

- is suffering from untreatable pain
- has such severe heart and/or lung disease that it is unable to breathe properly
- is no longer able to eat or drink normally
- cannot empty its bowels or bladder without pain
- is incontinent
- is unable to stand or move normally
- has become blind and is at risk of injuring itself
- is severely ill and the emotional or financial demands of caring for it are more than you and your horse can manage

How is euthanasia performed?

There are two methods of euthanasia: injection of an overdose of drugs and use of a gun.

Lethal injection

The horse may first be given a sedative injection to calm it. A specific mixture of drugs is injected via a catheter inserted into a vein and induces a rapid and pain-free death. Your horse will fall down and very quickly lose all consciousness and the ability to feel pain or fear. Another injection may be required to stop its heart.

Your horse may make some gasps during the procedure and this can be distressing for you to see. But be reassured – these are only natural reflexes and your horse will already be dead when they occur.

This method is not appropriate for all horses, especially those that do not like injections. The body of a horse euthanased in this way cannot be disposed of by processing (for example through a slaughterhouse or hunt kennels) and this will substantially increase the costs of disposal.

Use of a gun

Your horse may be given a sedative to calm it. Then the muzzle of the gun is placed below the forelock. The bullet passes into the brain resulting in instantaneous death. There is a loud noise as the gun goes off and your horse will fall very suddenly to the ground, possibly with some bleeding from the nose. Your horse will not hear or feel anything. Occasionally, your horse's limbs will continue to move when it is on the ground but these are normal reflexes after death.

The body of a horse euthanased in this way can be disposed of by processing (see 'What happens to the body?').

Should I be there at the end?

You should discuss with your vet in advance whether you wish to be with your horse at the end. Your horse may be less nervous if familiar people are with it when the vet arrives. However, if you are frightened or anxious, your horse may sense this and become nervous. Do not feel embarrassed or guilty if you do not wish to be present. Euthanasia of a horse, particularly when a gun is used, can be distressing to observers.

Who decides that the time is right for euthanasia?

Your vet will be able to advise you on the options for euthanasia and answer any questions you may have, but will not make the decision to choose euthanasia for you. It is usually possible to have some time to make the decision and it may be helpful to discuss the situation with your family or other horse owners who have already experienced this situation. If your horse is insured and its death will lead to a claim, it is very important to inform the insurance company that euthanasia is being considered and get their agreement beforehand.

What happens to the body?

There are several options for disposal of your horse's body but these depend on the method of euthanasia used. Whichever option for disposal you choose, it is usually better to have all the arrangements made in advance (or, perhaps better still, to ask someone to make them for you) as it is normal to feel unable to make such decisions while you are grieving for your horse. Your vet may be able to arrange disposal for you.

Processing

The body can only be sent to slaughterhouse or hunt kennels if the method of euthanasia was by shooting. When lethal injection is used, the drug levels in the horse's body remain very high and it is not safe for the body to be disposed of in this way. Your vet will have all the appropriate details and will probably make all the arrangements on your behalf. There is still a cost involved with this method of disposal but it is considerably less than for cremation.

Cremation

This is an increasingly popular option although is it very expensive. Your vet will be able to provide you with details, and will probably be able to make all the necessary arrangements for you.

Burial

Unfortunately, this is not a very realistic option unless you have your own land or permission from the landowner because burial is limited to specific sites by law and is controlled by DEFRA. The Environment Agency also should be consulted with regard to appropriate sites.

Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.

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Registered charity no: 224392

Photography: Steve Bardens • Indusfoto