

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

STABLING AND LIVERY



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Many aspects need to be considered when choosing the right management system and living environment for a horse.

For example, it is essential that the facilities are safe, secure and appropriate to the needs of the individual horse.



Keeping a horse at home sounds ideal to most owners. However, this will only work if enough suitable land, time and back-up help is available. Equally, keeping a horse permanently at grass might appear to be an easy management system, but this too can be time-consuming (maintaining the pasture and fencing) and is often unsuited to the needs of many horses.

Stabling

Stabling can range from traditional stalls and loose boxes (stables) to communal systems such as crew barns and sheltered corral units. Horses can be kept individually within separate boxes or housed with several others in larger barns. All systems have advantages and disadvantages, but the same general considerations apply to ensure the welfare of the horses being housed.



Sizes and space

Most loose boxes measure more than three and a half metres square, although smaller ponies may be comfortable in smaller boxes. Large horses, however, require an above-average size space to ensure that they have sufficient room to stand up, turn around and lie down in comfort and without risk of injury. In communal housing, consideration must be given to the age, size and type of horses sharing the space, to ensure that the animals all fare equally well and that fighting does not occur. Each horse being kept communally should have a minimum space of at least twice that required by a single horse kept in an individual loose box.

Ventilation and drainage

All stabling must have a good drainage system, be well ventilated and free from draughts. Drainage requires a combination of structural considerations (such as a sloping floor and/or drainage channels) and effective stable management, combining the use of an appropriate bedding material and, when soiled, its frequent removal (together with muck and discarded hay).

Effective ventilation is essential, to ensure that horses have fresh air, which is free from dust and spores. In a stuffy stable environment these can lead to respiratory infections and health problems. The design of the building should allow for the free flow of air, and (ideally) the opening should face away from prevailing winds. Rugs can minimise the risk of chills, allowing good ventilation to be maintained.

Lighting

Plenty of natural light is desirable, and this can be provided by windows, open aspects and clear roof panels. Electric lighting (both inside and out) is essential during dark winter months, to provide a safe working environment for the keeper. Horses also benefit from a well-lit environment. All electrical fittings should be safe, durable and well out of the reach of the horses.

Bedding

It is essential to provide non-slip flooring. Rubber matting provides an excellent base that is both comfortable (allowing the horse to stand and lie down), and a good shock absorber, thereby helping to minimise stress on the horse's joints from prolonged standing. If horses are stabled for long periods, additional loose bedding material should be used on top of the rubber matting, thus providing additional comfort and an absorbent disposable layer. If not permanently sealed, rubber mats require lifting on a regular basis, so that the floor beneath can be washed periodically with disinfectant.

The bedding provided must suit the horse (and also the time constraints on the keeper) and be of a suitable thickness so that, when the horse lies down, there is no chance of injury being caused by floor pressure or abrasion. This will also minimise the risk of becoming stuck (cast) against the walls if the horse rolls.

Various types of loose bedding material are available – such as straw, wood shavings, shredded paper and chopped cardboard. Whichever bedding is used, it must be of good quality and hazard-free. Each type of bedding has advantages and disadvantages. The choice should be based on individual needs and circumstances. The effectiveness of a bedding material reduces if the bed itself is not kept clean or if insufficient quantities are used.



Livery

Keeping a horse at home is not an easy option as the upkeep of fields, fencing etc is expensive and also time-consuming. Also, providing equine companionship for a ridden horse can be a logistical headache.

Renting grazing space or providing land at home is not an option for every horse keeper. Therefore many horses are kept at private or commercial livery yards. These provide a variety of levels of service, ranging from the simple renting of a stable and/or shared grazing space, to the total care (including exercise) of a horse on behalf of its owner.

The advantages of keeping a horse at a good livery yard include:

- access to shared facilities (such as a manege or indoor arena)
- companionship for the horse
- company for the rider not wishing to ride out alone
- extra security and vigilance
- assistance in caring for the horse if required.

DIY livery – where grazing and a stable or shelter are rented, but all of the work and responsibility for looking after the horse rests with the horse keeper. This is ideal for people who have the time to look after the horse by themselves but who wish to take advantage of the mutual support (between owners) available in a livery environment.

Grass livery – this is similar to DIY livery, with the horse keeper providing sole care of the horse, but on a grazing-only basis. There should be adequate shelter and suitable grazing, plus the use of a stable in an emergency. Grazing may also need to be restricted in the summer, or supplemented in winter with hay and, perhaps, hard feed. There should be adequate on-site security and consistent equine companionship for the horse.

Assisted livery – this is basically an enhanced DIY arrangement, with most of the work still being the responsibility of the horse keeper. The livery manager/staff help out, perhaps by putting in feeds or bringing in and turning out the horse on behalf of the keeper.

Part livery – where daily care and maintenance of the horse (feeding, mucking out and turn-out) is provided by the livery yard, with the horse's owner being responsible only for grooming and exercise. This is useful for busy, working owners who are unable to provide a consistent routine themselves or who wish to maximise their time with the horse by handling and riding the horse rather than performing stable chores.

Full livery – where care, exercise and associated tasks are carried out by the livery yard in agreement with, and on behalf of, the owner. Full livery can be standard care or specifically directed for individual needs (such as a competition livery or breaking and schooling livery). Full livery can be expensive and another disadvantage is that it does not allow a close relationship to be established between a horse and its owner.

Working livery – in this case, the horse is kept at a riding school, where the cost of keeping is offset by the use of the horse in riding lessons. This arrangement requires careful consideration, to ensure whether it is suitable for the horse concerned, and whether it would unduly limit the use of the horse by the owner.

Choosing the right livery yard

Having decided to keep a horse on livery, careful consideration should be given to the choice of yard. The horse's basic needs should not be compromised for the convenience of the owner. The nearest yard may not be the best one, and (equally) a luxury arena is no compensation for an inadequate turn-out provision.

The British Horse Society operates a livery yard approval scheme, which provides horse owners with a useful guide when choosing such facilities. However, prospective yards should still be visited and arrangements discussed with the proprietor, to ensure that the yard and/or conditions are suitable.

When visiting the yard, it is important to look beyond first impressions. Horses should look happy and relaxed and there should be adequate stabling facilities and turn-out to suit the number of horses at the yard. The facilities do not need to be “gold-plated”, but they should be safe, well constructed and suitably maintained.

Some essential considerations and indicators of a good yard are the provision of good on-site security, a well-managed yard routine (with clear yard rules, worming programs and care arrangements) and a sensible livery contract.



Golden rules to ensure the well-being of housed horses

In addition to providing a comfortable and clean stable, it is also important to consider the horse's needs. This prevents boredom and the development of bad habits and stress-related behaviour when housed. Attempts should be made to provide a stimulating environment (and occupation) during periods of confinement.

- Establish a good yard routine, so that (for example) horses know what to expect and when they will next be fed
- Adequate appropriate care and exercise is essential for all horses, particularly those that are housed
- Allow for plenty of variety during the day and maximise the time spent out of the stable – for example, let the horse loose in the manege arena (perhaps with another horse) when the stable is being mucked out
- Horses benefit from consistent human contact and handling. Spend time interacting with the horse, for example, grooming at times other than when preparing for riding.
- Divide the horse's diet into smaller feeds, feeding little and often. Provide a fibre-based diet and use fine-mesh hay nets and snack balls, to increase the time spent foraging for the available feed.
- Make sure fresh, clean water is available at all times
- Horses are naturally inquisitive. Stable toys can provide good interaction and keep the horses occupied. Alternate toys regularly, to maintain novelty and interest.
- Provide additional interest by hanging a carrot, apple or swede from the ceiling of the stable
- Horses are herd animals, and need compatible equine companionship. Allow for some interaction between horses in adjacent stables, to provide essential equine contact.
- Enriching the stabling environment is highly beneficial, but it is no substitute for time spent out of the confines of the stable (where the horse may exercise and behave freely with other equines)

Related Blue Cross publications

The following leaflets from the *All About Pets* series may be useful.

- *Yard safety and security (H3)*
- *The field-kept horse (H5)*
- *Feeding and watering (H7)*

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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