

Euthanasia: The Most Difficult Decision

Few things in life are as difficult to accept as death. Death becomes even more painful when you must decide whether to end a beloved animal's life. However, there may come a time when, for humane, medical, economic, or safety reasons, you may need to consider euthanasia for your horse.

The decision to euthanize, or induce a painless death, should never be made without careful consideration. The right choice is clearly the one that is in the best interest of the horse and the humans who care for it.

CONSIDER THE SITUATION

There are a wide range of circumstances under which euthanasia may be considered. Among some of the most common are:

- Incurable, progressive disease
- Incurable, transmissible disease
- Chronic lameness
- Inoperable colic
- Foals born with serious defects
- Debilitation in old age
- Severe traumatic injury
- Dangerous behavioral traits
- Undue financial burden of caring for a sick or incapacitated horse
- Undue suffering for any reason

Every case is unique. Even in similar situations, the decision to euthanize an animal is highly individual. For example, in the case of a severe traumatic injury, such as a broken leg, the animal's psychological makeup can influence the outcome. Some horses may respond better to treatment than others. Some are more cooperative than others, and some have a higher pain tolerance than others. Euthanasia is a highly emotional issue. Yet it is important to address the situation from a practical standpoint as well. Whether you are dealing with an emergency or a long-term illness, discuss the following questions with your veterinarian to help you decide what is right for you and your horse:

- What is the likelihood of recovery or at least an acceptable return to usefulness?
- Is the horse suffering?
- Has the horse become depressed or despondent, or does it continue to show an interest and desire to live?
- How much discomfort or distress can you accept seeing your own animal endure?
- What kind of special care will this animal require, and can you meet its needs?
- Can you continue to provide for this animal economically?
- What are the alternatives?

THE VETERINARIAN-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP

As the horse's owner, you ultimately have the responsibility of determining the horse's fate. Your veterinarian can provide you with medical information and help you fully understand the horse's prognosis. Your equine practitioner can also explain the options, and offer comfort and support. But the veterinarian cannot decide for you whether or not to euthanize your horse. If you are in doubt about the prognosis or your options, it is important to get a second opinion.

Equine practitioners are frequently asked, "What would *you* do if . . ." The question, however, puts your veterinarian in a difficult position. No matter how compassionate and caring, that individual is not attached to the animal as you are, nor will your veterinarian assume the emotional or economic burden of caring for it. Therefore, you must come to a decision that is right for you.

Only in extreme emergencies does a veterinarian act on an animal's behalf without an owner's consent. An example of such a situation might be a horse that gets loose on a roadway and is struck by a car. A veterinarian may notify the local humane society and choose to euthanize a severely injured horse to end its suffering. But such cases are rare.

Remember, too, that a veterinarian must follow his or her conscience. A veterinarian may refuse to euthanize an animal if euthanasia seems unnecessary or unjustified. Or the veterinarian may choose to discontinue treating the animal if an owner is inhumanely allowing an animal to suffer or is unduly prolonging its death.

PLANNING & PREPARATION

If you and your veterinarian agree that euthanasia is the best choice, it is important to prepare as best you can. If you are able to make the decision in advance rather than under emergency conditions, making prior arrangements will ease the process. These guidelines might help:

- Determine when and where are most comfortable and practical for you, the veterinarian, and the horse. Keep in mind that removal of the body from the site should be as safe and easy as possible.
- If you board your horse, inform the stable manager of the impending situation.
- Decide whether you wish to be present during the procedure. Only you know what is right for you. You may wish to ask someone to observe in your absence.
- Be aware that, for safety reasons, your veterinarian will probably not allow you to be touching or holding the animal when it is put down.
- Discuss the procedure in advance so you know what to expect.
- Make arrangements for the prompt removal and disposal of the body. Check with your veterinarian and/or the city or county health departments. Many municipalities have ordinances prohibiting or restricting burial. Removal to a rendering facility or pet crematory may be required.
- Explain to members of your family, especially children, in sensitive but honest terms, why the decision was made to euthanize the horse.
- Allow yourself to grieve. Finding a support person or group to talk to can help you work through this difficult period.
- If the horse is insured, notify the insurance company in advance of the euthanasia so that there are no problems with claims. While the veterinarian

will provide you with the required documentation, the notification, filing, and follow-up are your responsibilities.

A PEACEFUL END

As a caring owner, you want your horse to have a peaceful, painless end. Most commonly, the veterinarian will administer barbiturates (sedatives) in a dose sufficient to shut down the horse's central nervous system. The drugs will stop the heart, and the animal will quit breathing. The drugs act quickly and effectively. However, not all horses respond in exactly the same way. If you plan to be present when the lethal injection is given, keep in mind that the horse may simply drop, or could draw a deep breath, shudder, paddle, or show other signs of distress before succumbing.

COPING WITH EMOTIONS

Given the affection we have for horses, dealing with their deaths can be extremely difficult. But death is a part of life, and finding the resources to cope with your emotions is important.

To help you deal with your own grief, there are local and national counseling organizations, including the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine's Pet Loss Support Hotline, (916) 752-4200. Your veterinarian may also know of area resources that can help you, so don't be afraid to ask.

INSURANCE CONSIDERATIONS

If your horse is insured, become familiar with the regulations concerning your policy -- even *the fine print* -- before you act. Most insurance carriers require that they be kept fully informed from the beginning about a horse's medical condition, especially if death or euthanasia is a potential outcome. Even in an emergency, a reasonable attempt should be made to notify the insurance company. This notification is the owner's responsibility, not the veterinarian's. If the animal can be stabilized, many policies require a second opinion before a horse is euthanized. However, under extreme circumstances, it is always up to the discretion of the owner and veterinarian to act in the best interest of the horse. By being aware of your policy's guidelines, you can minimize any unpleasant surprises which relate to your claim.

AAEP GUIDELINES

The American Association of Equine Practitioners has developed euthanasia guidelines to help your veterinarian assist you during this very difficult time. The AAEP's standards apply to all horses, regardless of their monetary worth, and are designed "to avoid and terminate incurable and excessive suffering." Included in the guidelines are the following test statements:

- Is the condition chronic or incurable?
- Does the immediate condition suggest a hopeless prognosis for life?
- Is the horse a hazard to himself or his handlers?
- Will the horse require continuous medication for the relief of pain for the remainder of its life?

THINKING AHEAD

Unfortunately, your horse, like all living creatures, is not going to live forever. If your horse remains healthy and happy into old age and dies a peaceful, natural death, you are fortunate. However, by thinking about what you would do in an emergency, or how you would act if your horse's life became painful and unbearable to watch, you can be prepared for whatever happens. And by sharing this plan with others, especially those who care for your horse in your absence, you assume the ultimate responsibility of ownership by easing the decision-making process for everyone. Finally, you show the ultimate respect for your horse by relieving it of unendurable pain or disease.

Source: American Association of Equine Practitioners