



Equine Euthanasia Options

Euthanasia is a term derived from the Greek words “eu,” meaning good, and “thanatos,” meaning death. Euthanasia means “good death.”

Did You Know? Horse owners are responsible for the stewardship and well-being of their animals in normal situations, through the horse’s aging process, and in emergency situations.

Horse ownership is based on the stewardship and care of a living animal throughout various stages of its life. That ownership comes with responsibility, and owners must be prepared to make good decisions regarding the health and welfare of their equines on a daily basis. One of the most difficult and emotionally draining responsibilities is determining, with the advice of your veterinarian, the appropriate time to end a horse’s life. It is a good idea to have a plan in place before you, as an owner, are faced with such a decision. Sometimes an emergency means a decision to euthanize must be made quickly.

According to the American Association of Equine Practitioners, justification for euthanizing a horse for humane reasons should be based on medical considerations as well as current and future quality of life issues for the horse. Some, but certainly not all, of the factors to be considered in evaluating the necessity for euthanasia of a horse are:

- Is the horse’s condition chronic, incurable, and/or resulting in unnecessary pain and suffering?
- Does the condition of the horse present a hopeless prognosis?
- Is the horse a hazard to itself or to others around it?
- Has the horse suffered a severe or traumatic injury from which it can’t recover?

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, there are only three acceptable methods of euthanasia for horses: barbiturate overdose given intravenously by a veterinarian, gunshot, and penetrating captive bolt. Each method has its own advantages and disadvantages and must be considered on a case-by-case basis. According to Tom Lenz, DVM, who has written extensively on the topic, minimizing fear, anxiety, and apprehension must be considered in determining which method is most appropriate. Additionally, Dr. Lenz said any human observer’s psychological response to euthanasia of the animal must be considered.

Barbiturate Overdose (given by a veterinarian)

The most commonly used barbiturate is sodium pentobarbital, which brings about a state of unconsciousness within a few seconds. The drug then shuts down the animal’s brain function, including the part of the brain that controls cardiac and respiratory systems, bringing about the animal’s death. Veterinarians may choose to inject a sedative prior to administering the barbiturate. This often makes the procedure less stressful for the owner or other bystanders to view. The major advantage of the barbiturate overdose is its speed of action and minimal discomfort to the horse. The major disadvantages to this method are that only a licensed veterinarian may administer the IV injection, and following euthanasia, the carcass will contain high levels of barbiturate, making it an environmental hazard. There is also a rare chance the horse will experience a reaction to the barbiturate. The cost of this type of euthanasia varies throughout the country.

Gunshot

The proper use of a firearm causes trauma in the cerebral hemisphere and brainstem and results in a painless, immediate death. One advantage of gunshot is that there is less need for the animal to be restrained. Additionally, the carcass does not present any environmental dangers. However, this method should never be attempted by an inexperienced person. This method of euthanasia can be dangerous if performed improperly. The bullet may ricochet, for instance, and bystanders must use extreme caution during the procedure. It is also aesthetically displeasing to the owner and/or bystanders.

Captive Bolt

Penetrating captive bolts are powered by gunpowder or compressed air. Similar to gunshot, it causes trauma to the cerebral hemisphere and brainstem, resulting in an instant, painless death. Additionally, the carcass is not an environmental threat. The captive bolt should only be used by skilled individuals and might not be available in all locations. This method might be extremely displeasing for an owner or bystanders to observe.

Carcass Disposal

Arrangements must be made for removal of the animal's remains following death, be it from natural causes or euthanasia. If the horse dies or is euthanized at an equine hospital, the hospital can take care of this for a fee. In other cases, the owner of the deceased animal must make arrangements. Keep in mind that in most states, it is the legal responsibility of the attending veterinarian to ensure the carcass is disposed of properly. If the owner does not follow local statutes (i.e., whether the horse can be buried on the owner's property), he or she might unintentionally cause legal problems for the veterinarian.

See "Where Does a Deceased Horse Go?" in this series to learn about the different disposal options.