



Horse Care:

Euthanasia

Why do I have to think about it in advance?

Saying goodbye to a horse is one of the hardest decisions an owner will ever face. Whether it comes after years of companionship or suddenly due to illness or injury, understanding the process can make this difficult time a little easier. It will make it easier to decide when is the right time, and what to do next.

When is the right time?

Deciding when to have your horse put down is never easy. The key factor is **quality of life**.

Ask yourself:

- Is my horse comfortable and pain-free?
- Are they eating well and maintaining weight?
- Can they move around without distress?
- Do they still show interest in their surroundings and normal behaviours?

If the bad days outweigh the good, or if your horse is suffering from uncontrolled pain, chronic disease, or a catastrophic injury, euthanasia may be the kindest option. Remember, age alone is not necessarily a reason - many older horses enjoy a good quality of life. Your vet can help you assess your horse's condition and guide you through this decision.

How is Euthanasia Performed?

There are two main methods, both humane and widely accepted:

1. Lethal Injection

- The most common method.
- The horse is usually sedated first to keep them calm.
- A catheter is placed in the jugular vein, and a concentrated anaesthetic drug is administered.
- The horse loses consciousness within seconds and the heart stops shortly after.
- Some muscle twitching or deep breaths may occur, and in very rare cases more dramatic muscle activity, but the horse is unconscious before falling.

2. Free Bullet (Shooting)

- Performed by a licensed professional (vet, knacker, or huntsman).
- Instantaneous loss of consciousness and death.
- May be chosen for practical reasons, such as carcass disposal or in emergencies.
- Can be distressing for owners and onlookers due to noise and visible effects, but it is quick and painless for the horse.
- Careful choice of location may be needed for health and safety reasons.

Both methods are considered equally humane. The choice often depends on personal preference, circumstances, and local regulations. If you're not sure which is the better option for your horse, talk with your vet. Factors that may influence the decision could include, for example, whether the horse was head shy (which might make injection preferable), or if there was any underlying circulatory disease (in which case use of a free bullet

may be quicker).

What Happens Afterwards?

Planning ahead can reduce stress on the day. After euthanasia, you'll need to decide how your horse's body will be handled:

- **Cremation:** Individual cremation (with ashes returned) or communal cremation.
- **Burial:** Possible if you own the land and meet local regulations (e.g., distance from water sources).
- **Collection:** Horses can sometimes be collected by a licensed fallen stock service.
- **Hunt kennels:** Sometimes an option if euthanasia was by shooting.

Before the procedure, move your horse to an accessible area for collection. This avoids difficulties with machinery after the event.

Costs and Insurance

Euthanasia costs vary depending on the method and aftercare chosen. Expect additional charges for cremation or burial. Some insurance policies cover euthanasia and disposal, but not all do - check your policy in advance.

Should You Be There?

Many owners choose to stay with their horse during euthanasia, while others prefer to say goodbye beforehand. There is no right or wrong choice - do what feels best for you and your horse. If you stay, your vet will explain what to expect, including possible reflex movements after death.

Coping with Loss

The emotional impact of losing a horse is profound. Grief, guilt, and sadness are normal. Consider:

- Memorial options: Keepsakes, framed photos, or planting a tree.
- Support: Talk to friends, your vet, or bereavement services such as the [Blue Cross](#).
- Time: Allow yourself to grieve—every owner's journey is different.