



Horse Care:

Gelding

What is gelding and why is it done?

Gelding, or more properly **castration**, is the surgical removal of a colt's or stallion's testicles. It is one of the most common surgical procedures performed on horses. While it's a routine procedure for vets, it's still a big decision for owners.

The main reasons for castration include:

- **Behavioural management:** Stallions can be difficult to handle, especially around mares. Castration usually makes horses calmer and easier to manage.
- **Safety:** Reduces aggressive or competitive behaviour, lowering the risk of injury to handlers and other horses.
- **Preventing unwanted breeding:** Ensures your horse cannot sire foals.
- **Welfare:** Geldings can live in groups with less friction than stallions, reducing isolation and stress.

While some stallions are well-mannered, most require expert handling and facilities. For the average owner, geldings are safer and easier to keep.

When is the Best Time to Castrate?

Timing matters for both safety and recovery:

- **Age:** Most vets recommend castration between **6 and 18 months**. Younger horses recover faster and are less likely to develop strong stallion behaviours.

- **Season:** Spring or autumn is ideal - cooler weather means fewer flies and lower infection risk.
- **Health:** Horses should be healthy and up to date with vaccinations, especially tetanus.

Older horses can still be castrated, but the procedure is more complex and carries a higher risk of complications such as bleeding. Larger testicles mean larger blood vessels, and more chance of complications than if the colt is castrated before completing puberty.

How is Castration Performed?

There are two main techniques:

1. Standing Castration

- The horse is sedated and local anaesthetic is injected into the testicles and scrotum to numb them.
- The procedure is done with the horse standing, usually in the field.
- Sedation is safer than general anaesthesia for the patient but requires a calm, well-handled horse, and surgery is more complex.

2. Recumbent Castration

- The horse is placed under general anaesthesia and laid on the ground or a padded surface.
- Allows the vet better access and control, often preferred for larger or more fractious horses.
- Commonly performed at a clinic or in a safe outdoor area.

In both cases, the testicles are removed through an incision in the scrotum. The wound is usually left open to drain naturally, reducing infection risk.

What Are the Risks?

Castration is generally safe, but complications can occur:

- **Bleeding:** Some bleeding is normal, but heavy bleeding needs urgent veterinary attention.
- **Swelling:** Mild swelling is expected; severe swelling may indicate infection.
- **Infection:** Good hygiene and aftercare reduce this risk.
- **Evisceration:** Rare but serious - intestines can protrude through the incision. This is an emergency.
- **Behavioural persistence:** Some geldings retain stallion-like behaviour, especially if castrated late.

Aftercare: What to Expect

Proper aftercare is essential for a smooth recovery:

- **Exercise:** Light exercise (hand-walking or turnout) helps reduce swelling and promotes drainage.
- **Wound checks:** Inspect the incision at least twice daily for signs of infection (heat, discharge, foul smell).
- **Fly control:** Use fly repellents or masks to prevent irritation and infection.
- **Pain relief:** Your vet may prescribe anti-inflammatory medication.
- **Monitor behaviour:** Watch for signs of discomfort, lethargy, or colic.

Most horses recover well within **2–4 weeks**, but always follow your vet's advice.

When to Call the Vet

Contact your vet immediately if you notice:

- Continuous or heavy bleeding.
- Severe swelling or discharge.
- Signs of colic or depression.

- Tissue protruding from the incision.

Prompt action can prevent serious complications.