



Horse Care:

Horse Passports

Why are Horse Passports important?

Owning a horse comes with many responsibilities, and one of the most important legal requirements in the UK is ensuring your horse has a valid passport.

This is (except in a very small number of exceptions) a legal requirement for anyone owning or keeping equids (horses, donkeys, zebras etc). The Passport has to stay **with the horse** wherever they are, so it's not just owners, but transporters, keepers, and people with horses or ponies on loan that need to be aware of the rules.

What is a Horse Passport?

A horse passport is a **legal identity document** for your horse. It contains:

- A unique identification number.
- A description and silhouette of your horse.
- The horse's microchip number.
- Records of vaccinations and medications.

Every horse, pony, donkey, and mule in the UK must have a passport by **six months of age or by 30th November in the year of birth**, whichever is later.

Why Are Horse Passports Needed?

The passport system exists for several important reasons:

- **Food safety:** Although most UK horses are not eaten, some are

slaughtered for export. The passport records whether a horse is declared “not for human consumption.” This matters because many common drugs, like phenylbutazone (“bute”), are unsafe for humans.

- **Medication control:** Vets must check the passport before giving certain drugs. If the passport isn’t available, the vet can only use medicines licensed for food-producing animals.
- **Disease control and competition rules:** Vaccination records in the passport are essential for events and transport.
- **Identification:** Passports help confirm a horse’s identity for sales, breeding, and welfare checks.

Who Needs a Passport?

Almost **every horse in the UK** needs a passport, regardless of whether it is ridden, retired, or kept as a pet.

Horses running wild are exempt, but only if they meet certain criteria. Those identified as being exempt are the herds listed in:

- The Dartmoor Commoners Council studbook
- The Exmoor Pony Society records
- The records of the Verderers of New Forest
- The studbook of New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle society
- The lists of the National Trust in the case of the Konik equines.
- The Carneddau ponies in Wales.

In all cases, this exemption only applies when the horse is genuinely running wild and is non-domesticated. Even these require passports if they are taken out of their environment or handled.

What Happens If You Don’t Have One?

Failing to have a passport is a **criminal offence**. You could face:

- Fines for non-compliance.
- Restrictions on veterinary treatment: Without a passport, your vet cannot legally give certain medications.
- Problems with sale or movement: You cannot legally sell or move a horse without a passport.

In short, not having a passport can cause serious legal and welfare issues.

How Do You Get a Horse Passport?

Passports are issued by **Passport Issuing Organisations (PIOs)**, which are approved by DEFRA. To apply, you'll need:

- The horse's details (age, breed, sex).
- A completed identification form, including a diagram of markings drawn by a vet.
- A microchip number (microchipping is compulsory before a passport is issued).

Once issued, the passport stays with the horse for life. If you buy a horse, the passport should be transferred into your name within **30 days**.

What About Medication and the Food Chain?

One of the most important sections in the passport is the “**Declaration**” page. Here, the owner must state whether the horse is intended for human consumption. Most owners sign to **exclude their horse from the food chain**, which allows vets to use a wider range of medications. If this section is not signed, vets must assume the horse could enter the food chain and restrict drug use accordingly.