

Cinder Hill Equine Clinic



Euthanasia & Disposal

We all keep our horses for a variety of reasons, from companions through to competition horses. In doing so, we take on the responsibility for caring for our horse such as providing food, water, shelter, healthcare, and treatment when necessary. Another responsibility we have as horse owners, which we often don't think about, is what needs to be done when the time comes at the end of our horse's life. This may be when a horse requires euthanasia, which may be one of the most difficult decisions we will ever make or dies naturally. Even though this day, which will be inevitable, may be some time away, it is a good idea to consider the options and decide what would suit both you and your horse. It is often an emotional and traumatic time, so having had a think about the practicalities of dealing with the event before it occurs can help to make it a lot less stressful.

Exactly when to say goodbye will depend on your horse, his quality of life, the circumstances and/or what you require him to do. You will also need to think about what is best for your horse. Is he still able to work? Would he cope being turned out into a field for retirement and not working? Would it be kinder to end his life when he is happy and has not had a drastic change in his routine which he may not cope with very well? Whatever your considerations, your horse's health and quality of life is of utmost importance when considering euthanasia and, although it's a very hard decision to make, putting it off may have a major impact on your horse's welfare. Support in taking this decision is available and your Veterinary Surgeon is one of the best placed people to have a discussion with you and help you to decide whether the time has come to have your horse put to sleep.

Why would a horse require euthanasia?

Euthanasia is the elective ending of life, and it may be required for a variety of reasons. Either in an emergency situation, such as where a horse has suffered a catastrophic injury, or because you have decided it is the right time for your horse. This may be due to the debilitating effects of old age, disease or injury or your horse is no longer suited to their former career. Ultimately, there is no right or wrong answer as to when it's the right time and it depends entirely on what is right for you and your horse. You will know your horse better than anyone and you will become aware of when his quality of life has deteriorated to a point when he is no longer happy & enjoying life.

Methods of euthanasia

Lethal injection

With this method, the horse may be given some sedation and a catheter is placed into a vein in his neck. An injection is then given which is an overdose of anaesthetic, which causes the heart to stop beating. The horse will fall to the floor and normally this is a very smooth, peaceful process. Occasionally horses can move backwards before falling. This cannot be avoided and can be distressing for an owner to see. However, the horse is not aware of what is going on at this stage. This method can only be performed by a Veterinary Surgeon.

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Shooting

This method can be performed by someone with an appropriate licence or a Veterinary Surgeon who holds a firearm licence. Death is instant, though the body may continue to react in differing ways for a short time, sometimes stiffening or twitching. Although this can be distressing, this is part of the process and does not mean that the horse is still alive. The advantage of this method is that it avoids the use of catheters and injections and so it may be more suitable for needle-shy horses. However, although the process is quick, it can be distressing for owners who decide to stay with their horse due to the noise and potential for significant bleeding. The price is often included in the cost of disposal of the body if it is carried out by a licensed slaughterman.

One other option, although seldom considered, is to elect to allow your horse to be used for human consumption, in which case he must be sent to a licensed abattoir for euthanasia. You will not be able to consider this option if your horse has ever been given certain medicines, such as bute. Your horse's passport will be checked to ensure that it is not signed 'not fit for human consumption' or similar. This option may be considered on economic grounds as the abattoir will usually pay for the horse so there is no cost to the owner for euthanasia or disposal.

Should I be there when my horse is put to sleep?

It is not necessary for you to be there with your horse at the end. It can be a very upsetting and stressful experience for you and your horse may pick up on this if you are noticeably upset. Remember that, by this point, you will have already done the kindest thing for your horse by taking the right decision at the right time. You might want to consider asking a friend to be there with your horse in his last few minutes or you can ask the vet to bring someone to help. However, it is a decision only you can take and if you do decide to be there, make sure that you know what to expect and follow the instructions given to you by the person responsible for putting your horse to sleep. It is recommended that you walk away as soon as it is done and do not wait for your horse's body to be taken away as this can be distressing.

Disposal of your horse's body

This can be arranged via your veterinary practice or a licensed slaughterman will usually be able to dispose of the body for you. There are two main options:

1. Group cremation where the body is cremated with others. This option does not offer any ashes back.
2. Individual cremation where the body is cremated individually, and the ashes are returned to the owner.
3. Alternatively, if your horse has not had a lethal injection, some hunt kennels may be willing to dispose of the body.

The cost of disposal varies depending on the option chosen. As a guide, a group cremation will be around £300 and an individual cremation will be around £800.

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Insured horses

When making the decision to have your horse put to sleep and choosing which disposal option may be best, it is worth remembering that, generally, insurance companies will not cover the cost of euthanasia or the full cost of disposal, even if you have disposal covered on your policy. The amount of cover will usually be a contribution towards the cost of it, as set out in the policy document.

If your horse dies naturally, insurance companies will almost always require a post-mortem if you wish to make a claim. The body should not be disposed of before you have informed your insurance company and the post-mortem has been carried out. If your horse is insured and you intend to make a claim, you must inform the insurance company beforehand and make sure your Veterinary Surgeon is aware of this.

Further information:

If you have further questions or require more advice, please contact your vet, who will be happy to advise you. Alternatively, there are some online resources below which may help you:

BHS Friends at the End <https://www.bhs.org.uk/our-work/welfare/our-campaigns/friends-at-the-end>

World Horse Welfare www.worldhorsewelfare.org/just-in-case

Blue Cross www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-advice/euthanasia-and-horses