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Triple R Equine Welfare

# Euthanasia

Information Sheet No. 1

## What Do I Need To Know?

Few things in life are as difficult to accept as death. Death becomes even more painful when you must decide whether to end a beloved animal's life. However, there may come a time when, for humane, medical, economic, or safety reasons, you may need to consider euthanasia for your horse. The decision to euthanise, or induce a painless death, should never be made without careful consideration. The right choice is clearly the one that is in the best interest of the horse and the humans who care for it.

The word 'Euthanasia' is derived from the Greek terms 'eu', meaning good, and 'thanatos' meaning death. A good death would be one that occurs with minimal pain, and at the appropriate time in the horse's life to prevent unnecessary pain & suffering.

## Consider the Situation

There are a wide range of circumstances under which euthanasia may be considered. Among some of the most common are: Note that this list is **not** exhaustive.

- Debilitation in old age
- Severe traumatic injury
- Dangerous behavioural traits
- Foals born with serious defects
- Incurable, progressive disease
- Incurable, transmissible disease
- Chronic lameness
- Undue financial burden of caring for a sick or incapacitated horse
- Undue suffering for any reason

Every case is unique. Even in similar situations, the decision to euthanise an animal is highly individual. For example, in the case of a severe traumatic injury, such as a broken leg, the animal's psychological makeup can influence the outcome. Some horses may respond better to treatment than others. Some are more cooperative than others, and some have a higher pain tolerance than others. Euthanasia is a highly emotional issue. Yet it is important to address the situation from a practical standpoint as well. Whether you are dealing with an emergency or a long-term illness, discuss the following questions with your Veterinarian to help you decide what is right for you and your horse:

- What is the likelihood of recovery or at least an acceptable return to usefulness?
- Is the horse suffering?
- Has the horse become depressed or despondent, or does it continue to show an interest and desire to live?
- How much discomfort or distress can you accept seeing your own animal endure?
- What kind of special care will this animal require, and can you meet its needs?
- Can you continue to provide for this animal economically?
- What are the alternatives?

## The Veterinarian - Client Relationship

As the horse's owner, it is you who has the ultimate responsibility of determining your horse's fate. Your Veterinarian can provide you with medical information and help you fully understand the horse's prognosis. Your Vet can also explain the options, offer comfort and support, but the Veterinarian cannot decide for you whether or not to euthanise your horse. If you are in doubt about the prognosis or your options, it is important to get a second opinion. Vets are frequently asked, "What would you do if . . ." This question, however, puts your Vet in a difficult position. No matter how compassionate and caring, that individual is not attached to the animal as you are, nor will your Vet assume the emotional or economic burden of caring for it. Therefore, you must come to a decision that is right for you.

Because your Vet cannot make the euthanasia decision for you, it is essential that you understand your horse's condition. If you do not understand the diagnosis or the implications for your horse's future, ask to have them explained again. Rarely will the situation require an immediate decision. You will usually have some time to review the facts before making a decision.

Only in extreme emergencies does a Vet act on an animal's behalf without an owner's consent. An example of such a situation might be a horse that gets loose on a roadway and is struck by a car. A Vet may notify the local humane society and choose to euthanise a severely injured horse to end its suffering, but such cases are rare.

Remember, too, that a Vet must follow his or her conscience. A Vet may refuse to euthanise an animal if euthanasia seems unnecessary or unjustified. Or the Vet may choose to discontinue treating the animal if an owner is inhumane allowing an animal to suffer and/or is unduly prolonging its death.

## Planning & Preparation

If you and your Vet agree that euthanasia is the best choice, it is important to prepare as best you can. If you are able to make the decision in advance rather than under emergency conditions, making prior arrangements will ease the process. These guidelines might help:

- Determine when and where are most comfortable and practical for you, the Vet and the horse. Keep in mind that removal of the body from the site should be as safe and easy as possible.
- If you agist/board your horse, inform the stable manager of the impending situation.
- Decide whether you wish to be present during the procedure. Only you know what is right for you. You may wish to ask someone to observe in your absence.
- Be aware that, for safety reasons, your Vet may not allow you to be touching or holding the animal when it is put down.
- Discuss the procedure in advance so you know what to expect.
- Make arrangements for the prompt removal and disposal of the body. Check with your Veterinarian and/or the local Council. Many Councils have ordinances prohibiting or restricting burial. Removal to a rendering facility may be required.
- Explain to members of your family, especially children, in sensitive but honest terms, why the decision was made to euthanise the horse.
- Allow yourself to grieve. Finding a support person or group to talk to can help you work through this difficult period.
- If the horse is insured, notify the insurance company in advance of the euthanasia so that there are no problems with claims. While the Vet will provide you with the required documentation, the notification, filing, and follow-up are your responsibilities.

## A Peaceful End

As a caring owner, you want your horse to have a peaceful, painless end. While no ideal method of euthanasia exists, the procedure of choice should approach as closely as possible the following criteria:

- Is painless
- Produces rapid loss of consciousness and death
- Interrupts consciousness and reflexes simultaneously

Methods of euthanasia fall into two broad categories - chemical and physical.

## Chemical

Most commonly, the Vet will administer a large dose of sedatives prior to the lethal injection. The drugs will stop the heart and the animal will stop breathing. The drugs act quickly and effectively. However, not all horses respond in exactly the same way. If you plan to be present when the lethal injection is given, keep in mind that the horse may simply drop, or could draw a deep breath, shudder, paddle, or show other signs of distress before passing away.

The carcasses of animals euthanized by barbiturate overdose or other chemical agents may contain potentially harmful residues. They should be disposed in a manner that will prevent them from being consumed by humans or predatory/scavenger animal species.

Chemical euthanasia should only ever be performed by a qualified veterinarian.

## Physical

Shooting is a quick and effective means of humanely destroying animals and in most situations is the only practical method available for use in the field. Correctly placed head shots cause brain function to cease and results in an instantaneous loss of consciousness. The local knackery usually offers a physical euthanasia and carcass removal service for owners who are unable to bury animals on site.

Unnecessary people should keep away from the area to allow the animal to become less agitated. The shooter should approach the animal in a calm and quiet manner. Accuracy is important to achieve a humane death. One shot should ensure instantaneous loss of consciousness and rapid death without resumption of consciousness.

## Coping with Emotions

How can I say goodbye? Saying goodbye is an important step in managing the natural and healthy feelings of grief, sorrow, and loss. Your horse has been an important part of your life. It is natural and okay for you to feel you are losing a friend or a companion. Once the euthanasia decision has been made, you and other family members may want to say goodbye to your horse. Spending some special time with your horse may be appropriate. Family members may want to be alone with the horse. Once all the necessary information is available and the decision has been made, it is best not to wait too long before having your horse euthanised. Farewells are always difficult.

How can I face the loss? After your horse has died, it is natural and normal to feel grief and sorrow. For some people, spending some time with the horse after euthanasia is helpful. The grieving process includes accepting the reality of your loss, accepting that the loss and accompanying feelings are painful, and adjusting to your new life that no longer includes your horse. By understanding the grieving process, you will be better prepared to manage your grief and to help others in the family who share this loss.

## Insurance Considerations

If your horse is insured, become familiar with the regulations concerning your policy -- even the fine print -- before you act. Most insurance carriers require that they be kept fully informed from the beginning about a horse's medical condition, especially if death or euthanasia is a potential outcome. Even in an emergency, a reasonable attempt should be made to notify the insurance company. This notification is the owner's responsibility, not the veterinarian's.

If the animal can be stabilised, many policies require a second opinion before a horse is euthanised. However, under extreme circumstances, it is always up to the discretion of the owner and veterinarian to act in the best interest of the horse. By being aware of your policy's guidelines, you can minimise any unpleasant surprises which relate to your claim.

## Thinking Ahead

Unfortunately, your horse, like all living creatures, is not going to live forever. If your horse remains healthy and happy into old age and dies a peaceful, natural death, you are fortunate. However, by thinking about what you would do in an emergency, or how you would act if your horse's life became painful and unbearable to watch, you can be prepared for whatever happens. And by sharing this plan with others, especially those who care for your horse in your absence, you assume the ultimate responsibility of ownership by easing the decision-making process for everyone.

**Finally...** You show the ultimate respect for your horse, by relieving it of unendurable pain or disease.