



## END OF LIFE DECISIONS AND EUTHANASIA:

### EUTHANASIA

*Euthanasia is a term derived from the Greek words "eu," meaning good, and "thanatos," meaning death. Euthanasia means "good death."*

Horse ownership undoubtedly comes with numerous responsibilities, and owners must be prepared to make good decisions regarding the health and welfare of their equines on a daily basis. One of the most difficult and emotionally draining responsibilities is determining, with the help of your veterinarian, the appropriate time to end a horse's life. It is a good idea to have a plan in place before you, as an owner, are faced with such a decision, because often times these situations arise in the form of an emergency and a decision must be made quickly.

According to the American Association of Equine Practitioners, justification for euthanizing a horse for humane reasons should be based on medical considerations as well as current and future quality of life issues for the horse. Some, but certainly not all, of the factors to be considered in evaluating the necessity for intentional euthanasia of a horse are:

- Is the horse's condition chronic, incurable, and resulting in unnecessary pain and suffering?
- Does the condition of the horse present a hopeless prognosis?
- Is the horse a hazard to itself or to others around it?
- Will the horse require continuous medications for pain relief and suffering for the rest of its life?

Each horse should be treated on a case by case basis as an individual when making a euthanasia decision. Euthanasia is an incredibly emotional issue, but must be approached from a practical standpoint as an owner. The AAEP has developed euthanasia guidelines to help assist in making humane decisions regarding euthanasia of horses:

- A horse should not have to endure continuous or unmanageable pain from a condition that is chronic and incurable.
- A horse should not have to endure a medical or surgical condition that has a hopeless chance of survival.
- A horse should not have to remain alive if it has an unmanageable medical condition that renders it a hazard to itself or its handlers.
- A horse should not have to receive continuous analgesic medication for the relief of pain for the rest of its life.
- A horse should not have to endure a lifetime of continuous individual box stall confinement for prevention or relief of unmanageable pain or suffering.



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### PLANNING AND PREPARATION:

(Taken from AAEP: <https://aaep.org/horsehealth/euthanasia-most-difficult-decision>)

If you and your veterinarian 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 in an emergency situation, making prior arrangements will ease the process. These guidelines might help:

- Decide when and where the procedure will be best carried out, bearing in mind that arrangements must be made for removal of the body. Choose what is most comfortable and practical for you, your veterinarian, and your horse.
- If you board your horse, inform the stable manager of the situation.
- Decide whether you wish to be present during the procedure. If you cannot or do not wish to be present, you may want to ask a friend to stand in for you. Decide what is right for you. (If you are unfamiliar with the procedure and are unsure what to expect, discuss it with your veterinarian.)
- Be aware that, for safety reasons, your veterinarian may not allow you to be touching or holding the horse during the procedure. You will, however, be able to touch and be with your horse afterward.
- Make arrangements in advance for the prompt removal and disposal of the body. Check with your veterinarian and/or the city or county health department. Many municipalities have ordinances prohibiting or restricting burial. Removal to a rendering facility or pet crematory may be required.
- Explain to members of your family, especially children, in sensitive but honest terms, why the decision was made to euthanize the horse.
- Allow yourself to grieve. Finding a support person to talk with can help you work through this difficult period (see below).
- If the horse is insured, notify the insurance company in advance so that there are no problems with claims. While the veterinarian will provide you with any required documentation, the rest (notification, filing, follow-up, etc.) is your responsibility.

### COPING WITH EMOTIONS

Given the affection we have for our horses, dealing with their deaths can be extremely difficult. But dealing with your emotions honestly and going through the grieving process is important for your emotional well-being.

To help you deal with your grief, there are local and national counseling organizations, such as the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine's Pet Loss Support Hotline, (530) 752-4200. Your veterinarian may also know of resources in your area that can help you, so don't be afraid to ask.

### THINKING AHEAD

Death is an inevitable part of life. Your horse, like all living creatures, will not live forever. Ideally, your horse will remain healthy and happy into old age and will die a peaceful, natural death. However, it is wise to give some thought to other possibilities.

By thinking about what you would do in an emergency, or how you would act if your horse were to develop a painful or debilitating condition from which recovery was unlikely, you can be prepared for whatever happens. Be sure to share your thoughts and wishes on this issue with others, especially those who may be caring for your horse in your absence, such as your barn manager or neighbor, and your veterinarian. Doing so may spare your horse needless suffering if a severe illness or injury were to occur when you could not be contacted.

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According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, there are only three acceptable methods of euthanasia for horses: barbiturate overdose given intravenously by a veterinarian, gunshot, and penetrating captive bolt. Each method has its own advantages and disadvantages and must be considered on a case-by-case basis.

### **BARBITURATE (given by a veterinarian):**

The most commonly used barbiturate is sodium pentobarbital, which brings about a state of unconsciousness within a few seconds. The drug then shuts down the animal's brain function, including the part of the brain that controls cardiac and respiratory systems, bringing about the animal's death. Veterinarians may choose to inject a sedative prior to administering the barbiturate. This often makes the procedure less stressful for the owner or other bystanders to view. The major advantage of the barbiturate overdose is its speed of action and minimal discomfort to the horse. The major disadvantages to this method are that only a licensed veterinarian may administer the IV injection, and following euthanasia, the carcass will contain high levels of barbiturate, making it an environmental hazard. There is also a rare chance the horse will experience a reaction to the barbiturate. The cost of this type of euthanasia varies throughout the country.

### **GUNSHOT:**

The proper use of a firearm causes trauma in the cerebral hemisphere and brainstem and results in a painless, immediate death. One advantage of gunshot is that there is less need for the animal to be restrained. Additionally, the carcass does not present any environmental dangers. However, this method should never be attempted by an inexperienced person. This method of euthanasia can be dangerous if performed improperly. The bullet may ricochet, for instance, and bystanders must use extreme caution during the procedure. It is also aesthetically displeasing to the owner and/or bystanders.

### **CAPTIVE BOLT:**

Penetrating captive bolts are powered by gunpowder or compressed air. Similar to gunshot, it causes trauma to the cerebral hemisphere and brainstem, resulting in an instant, painless death. Additionally, the carcass is not an environmental threat. The captive bolt should only be used by skilled individuals and might not be available in all locations. This method might be extremely displeasing for an owner or bystanders to observe.