

Equine Welfare Series

RESPONSIBLE HORSE OWNERSHIP

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The ability to own a horse or other equid is a privilege that carries many responsibilities along with a variety of rewards. To “own responsibly” can mean many things and is often subject to individual interpretation. The owner’s responsibility to the horse begins before stewardship starts and extends past the owner’s individual care. At a minimum, horses rely on the owner to provide food, water, shelter and health care, along with physical and mental interaction. Additionally, when ownership of the horse must come to an end, it is the responsibility of the owner to ensure this relationship meets a positive end rather than one of neglect or abandonment. Preparing for these circumstances before they arise is critical to successful horse ownership and ultimately to the health of the horse.

Nutrition

Proper nutrition is a daily necessity for the health of the horse. In order to meet daily nutrient requirements and proper digestive health, considerations must be given to the type, amount and nutrient content of the feed. Also, free-choice access to clean, fresh water should be provided daily. The dietary needs of horses can vary greatly due to a number of factors, including activity level, age, size of the animal, climate and other management conditions. Seeking advice from a local

county Extension agent, an equine nutritionist or veterinarian to ensure the diet provided to the horse is appropriate can be helpful in avoiding nutrition-related issues.

Dietary recommendations should be made based on the horse’s body weight, body condition score, activity level and objectives for a feeding program, such as weight loss or gain. At a minimum, all horses require 1 percent of their current body weight in forage per day on a dry matter basis for proper gut health (Image 1).



Image 1: Horses require forage as the primary component of their diet. (Image credit: Jennie Ivey, The University of Tennessee)

Ideally, horses should consume between 2-2.5 percent of their current body weight in forage per day on a dry matter basis, and often at this intake amount, the horse's maintenance nutritional needs are met. Concentrate feeds can be used to provide additional nutrients and prevent any deficits in the diet that the forage was unable to provide to the animal. When feeding concentrates, it is important that no more than 0.75 percent of the horse's current body weight should be fed in one meal. This is to ensure that all the simple carbohydrates, or starches and sugars, are digested and absorbed before reaching the hindgut. If large amounts of simple carbohydrates are rapidly fermented within the cecum, colic and laminitis may result. Free access to clean, fresh water should be available to the horse at all times.

Shelter

Horses are well adapted to survive in a variety of environmental extremes if they are given the chance to acclimate and are provided with adequate feed and water. All horses should be provided with free access to shelter in the event they elect to seek protection from the weather. Adequate shelter can vary in size and form, largely dependent on the amount of horses using the shelter and general climate. While run-in sheds or barns are often the most widely accepted form of shelter, natural shelter such as trees or rock formations can also be adequate to shield horses from wind or provide shade from the sun. Any shelter should be tall enough to allow the horse to stand with its head and neck in a normal position with adequate clearance above its head to prevent injury and accommodate all horses in the vicinity. Typically, shelters are built between 9 and 12 feet tall and offer good drainage. Adequate structure ventilation is equally as important to

prevent respiratory irritation and free exchange of airflow.

Health Care

Horses, like humans and other animals, require routine health care to prevent disease, along with veterinary care when problems arise (Image 2). Preventative health care can range from the minimum recommended core vaccinations and parasite management to a much more detailed program, depending on the horse's risk of exposure. Additionally, horses and other equids require dental examinations and routine hoof care. At a minimum, horses should be observed once a day, especially during times of increased stress, foaling, or when introducing new horses to the herd.



*Image 2: Health Care
(Image credit: UT Department of
Animal Science)*

Responsible Breeding

The process of reproduction is an awe-inspiring, educational process and often crosses the mind of many horse owners. The decision to breed should be made with great consideration and care. There are numerous pros and cons to breeding, and it is important for owners to honestly and truthfully evaluate their individual situation before electing to breed. Often, there is a large cost associated with breeding, including stud fees and veterinary care.

The mare should be in good health and body condition in order to sustain the stress of pregnancy and lactation. Increased feed or boarding costs will also occur as the mare requires additional food and water throughout the gestation and lactation periods. Newborn foals also require veterinary care during the first few months of life that can become quite costly (Image 3).



Image 3: Responsible breeding is an important aspect of horse ownership. (Image credit: Holly Spooner, Middle Tennessee State University)

Overall, the largest and hardest decision for the owner to make is why to breed. For example:

- Do the mare and stallion have excellent bloodlines and a decent show record, or have they fallen short of her performance expectations and breeding is a backup option?
- Do the mare and stallion possess good conformation, free of unsoundnesses and/or conformation faults?
- Have either the mare or the stallion had any offspring? If so, how have they performed?
- Are the mare and stallion free of any genetic diseases or traits known to be linked genetically?
- What will be done with the foal? What is the outcome if the foal fails to meet initial expectations (e.g., color, height, disposition)?
- If the foal/weanling/yearling does not bring the desired sale price, what will happen? If unable to sell, what will be done with the foal?

Although these questions can be challenging to answer in a hypothetical setting, when evaluating a horse for breeding all need to be considered carefully and answered honestly. If there is any doubt or concern, it is better to err on the side of caution and refrain from breeding. Especially in light of the current unwanted horse population in the United States today, responsible breeding is extremely important and must not be taken lightly.

The Unwanted Horse

Situations often arise when equine owners realize they are in a position in which they no longer want, can afford, or can use their horse at the desired level. The American Horse Council (AHC) and the Unwanted Horse Coalition (UHC) strongly encourage horse owners to follow the mantra of, “horse owners should own responsibly,” as detailed in the above section. In 2006, approximately 105,000 horses were processed in the United States at one of the three operating equine slaughter facilities. As regulations governing USDA inspectors at equine

slaughter facilities changed in 2007, the number of unwanted horses began to rise because this humane end-of-life option was no longer available to many horse owners. Annually, many horses still are exported safely and processed humanely within Mexico and Canada. Further, the price a grade horse can bring at sale has dropped, because horses are not used for commodity production in the United States. While some horse owners cringe at the thought of sending horses to slaughter, the option for euthanasia at a processing plant is often much more humane than neglect, abandonment and suffering animals can face when no longer cared for properly. In light of this change in processing plant regulations within the United States, the equine industry is left with many questions regarding the unwanted horse population in the country.

Life Span and Disposition of Horses

While every owner hopes their horse will live a long, healthy life, it is important to be prepared for difficult end-of-life decisions before they arise. Many horses live well into their 20s or 30s, with good health care, management and exercise, yet life-threatening emergencies can arise quickly and often without warning. Make plans for disposing of horse carcasses (e.g., burial on property, composted, brought to landfill) before the situation arises to minimize any complications or problems.

A large component of responsible horse ownership is ensuring a way for the horse to continue receiving care if the owner is unable and/or providing a humane end-of-life option when the appropriate time comes. If possible, it is always best to find suitable new ownership or care for the

horse over euthanasia if the horse is healthy otherwise. Similarly, a humane end-of-life is a far more desirable and kind decision over neglect and abuse in the event adequate care cannot be maintained. Options to consider if keeping a horse is no longer an option include (adapted from the Unwanted Horse Coalition, 2008):

- Selling the horse privately for a second career or as a pasture mate.
- Selling the horse at auction or trading for a more suitable horse.
- Donation to a worthy, reputable organization.
- Retirement.
- Humane euthanasia.

Euthanasia can be translated back to Greek roots meaning “good death,” and when completed correctly can provide a humane method to end suffering or pain. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) recognizes penetrating captive bolt, gunshot and barbiturate overdose administered by a veterinarian as acceptable methods of euthanasia. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, each method requires knowledge and skill to be completed with efficiency and without pain or discomfort to the horse. It is also important to consider what will be done with the carcass after death, as some regions of the country have legal restrictions on how livestock can be disposed. Check with your veterinarian, local Extension office or government agency to determine the regulations in your area and create a plan in the event one is needed in the future.

Conclusions

Responsible horse ownership encompasses a variety of financial, time and knowledge commitments. Horses require food, water, shelter, care and interaction from their owners. By preparing for the responsibilities of horse ownership, practicing responsible breeding, and providing a humane end-of-life option, educated owners can begin to help the

number of unwanted horses throughout the United States. For more information on how to manage your horses and own responsibly, contact your local county Extension agent.

Resource

Own Responsibly. Unwanted Horse Coalition. 2008.
unwantedhorsecoalition.org



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