

# Equine Euthanasia

*How do I know it's time?*

Although everyone experiences the stages of grief, grieving is always a very personal process. Some people take longer than others to come to terms with denial, anger, guilt, and depression, and each loss is different. If you understand that these are normal reactions, you will be better prepared to cope with your feelings and to help others face theirs. Family and friends should be reassured that sorrow and grief are normal and natural responses to death.

If you or a family member have great difficulty in accepting your horse's death and cannot resolve feelings of grief and sorrow, you may want to discuss these feelings with a person who is trained to understand the grieving process and can support and help you as you mourn your loss. Your veterinarian certainly understands the relationship you have lost and may be able to suggest support groups and hot lines, grief counselors, clergymen, social workers, physicians, or psychologists who can help.

## *Remembering your horse*

The period from birth to old age is much shorter for most domestic animals than for people, and death is a normal part of the lifecycle. It cannot be avoided, but understanding and compassion can help you, your family, and your friends manage the grief associated with it.

For some people, a memorial service or ritual (such as releasing balloons or spreading cremated remains) can be therapeutic. You may choose to keep and display reminders of your beloved horse, such as photos or mementos or anything that helps you recall and treasure the good times you spent with your beloved companion. You may also wish to make a memorial contribution to a charity in honor of your horse and the deep bond you shared. Just as the grieving process varies from person to person, so does the method of remembering the animal that shared your life.

## *Should I get another horse?*

The death of a beloved horse can upset you emotionally, especially when euthanasia is involved. Some people may feel they would never want another horse. For some, the thought of having – and eventually losing – another animal may seem unbearable. These feelings may pass with time. For others, a new animal may help them recover from their loss more quickly. Just as grief is a personal experience, the decision of when, if ever, to bring a new horse into your life is a personal one.

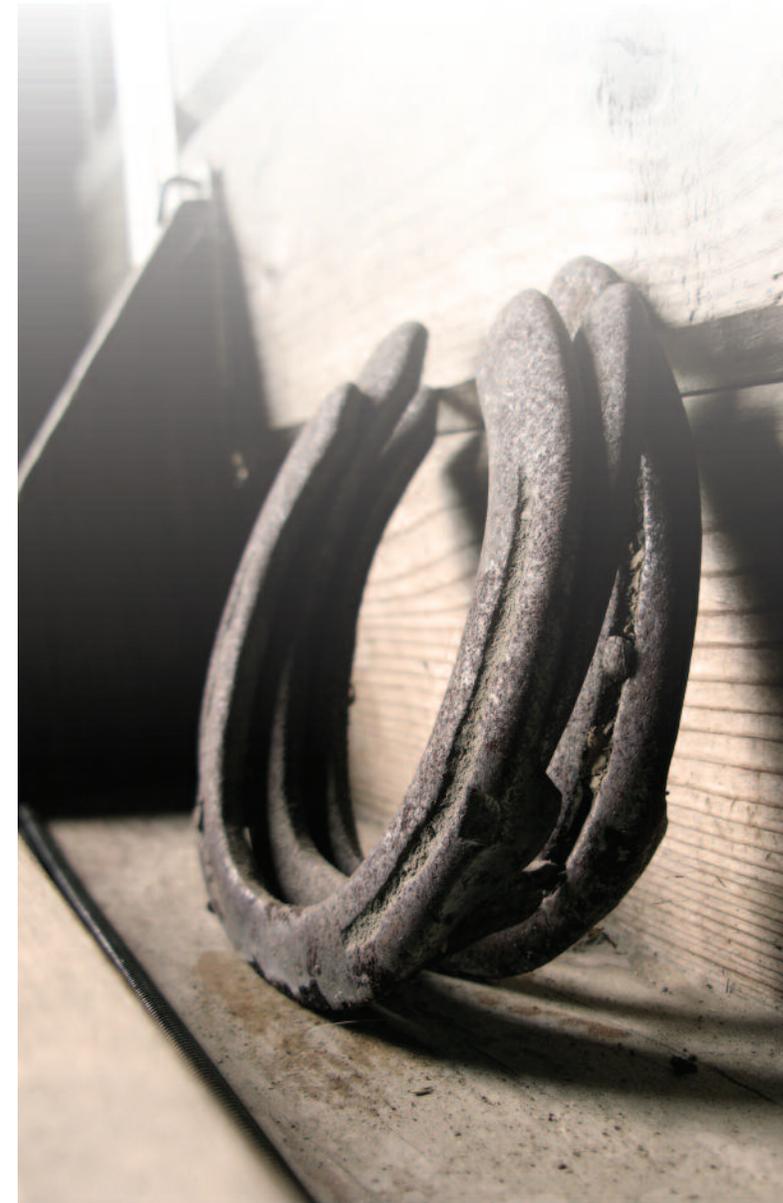
If a family member is having difficulty accepting the horse's death, getting a new horse before that person has resolved his or her grief may make them feel that you think the life of the deceased horse was unworthy of the grief that is still being felt. Family members should agree on the appropriate time to bring a new horse into their lives. Although you can never replace the horse you lost, you can find another to share your life.

For more information about the American Veterinary Medical Foundation and how you can make a memorial contribution, visit [www.avmf.org](http://www.avmf.org)



The AVMA and its more than 80,000 member veterinarians are engaged in a wide variety of activities dedicated to advancing the science and art of animal, human and public health.

For more information, visit, American Veterinary Medical Association [www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org)



American Veterinary Medical Association  
1931 North Meacham Road, Suite 100  
Schaumburg, Illinois 60173 - 4360  
Phone: 847.925.8070 • Fax: 847.925.1329  
[www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org) • [AVMAinfo@avma.org](mailto:AVMAinfo@avma.org)

Revised 9/10

Printed in the U.S.A.



American Veterinary Medical Association

## How do I know when it's time?

It's never an easy decision to make, but perhaps the most compassionate thing you can do for a horse that is extremely ill, severely injured, lame, or dangerous is to have your veterinarian induce its death quickly and humanely through euthanasia.

A decision concerning euthanasia may be one of the most difficult decisions you will ever make for your horse. Although it is a personal decision, it doesn't need to be a solitary one. Your veterinarian and your family and close friends can help you make the right decision and can support you as you grieve the loss of your horse.

## What should I do?

Eventually, many owners are faced with making life-or-death decisions for their horses. Such a decision may become necessary for the welfare of the horse and your family. Consider not only what is best for your horse, but also what is best for you and your family. For example, if your horse has an injury or disease that requires more care than you and your family can give to make sure it has a good quality of life, euthanasia may be the right decision. Quality of life is important for horses and people alike.

Once the decision for euthanasia has been made, you will need to decide where the euthanasia will be performed and what you want done with the remains of your horse's body. Local regulations may have an impact on what can be done with your horse's body; for example, some localities do not allow burial of large animals. Arranging in advance for the prompt removal of your horse's body may be necessary, especially if your horse is euthanized at a boarding stable or on someone else's property.

If your horse is insured, make sure you are aware of the details of coverage, including the insurance company's policy on notification prior to euthanasia. If you do not follow the proper procedures, your claim may be denied.

By making arrangements prior to euthanasia, it can bring some degree of comfort to know what will be done with your horse's body, and you will not have to focus on these decisions while you are grieving the recent loss of your beloved horse. Your veterinarian can provide information about burial, cremation, and other alternatives.

## How will I know when?

If your horse can no longer experience the things it once enjoyed, cannot respond to you in its usual ways, appears to be experiencing more pain than pleasure, is terminally ill or critically injured, or if the financial or emotional cost of treatment is beyond your means, you may need to consider euthanasia. Your veterinarian is best qualified to examine and evaluate your horse's condition and to discuss with you potential disabilities and long-term problems.

*Asking yourself the following questions can ease the decision-making process:*

- Does your horse have more "bad days" than "good days"?
- Is your horse suffering?
- Is the condition incurable?
- What are the chances that your horse will recover from its condition? How long will your horse be debilitated or in pain?
- Does your horse still seem interested in its surroundings and in its normal behaviors, or does it seem depressed or unresponsive?
- Will your horse require special care that you cannot provide or afford?
- Is your horse a danger to itself or to the people who handle it?

Your veterinarian understands your bond with your horse and can examine and evaluate your horse's condition, estimate its chances for recovery, and discuss any potential disabilities, special needs and long-term problems. He

or she can explain medical and surgical options as well as risks and possible outcomes. Because your veterinarian cannot make the euthanasia decision for you, you need to understand your horse's condition. If there is any part of the diagnosis or the possible effects on your horse's future that you don't understand, ask questions that will help you understand. Although there are times when the decision needs to be made immediately, you usually will have some time to review the facts and discuss it with your family and friends before making the decision.

## What if the horse is healthy?

If your horse has become dangerous, unmanageable, unserviceable, or difficult to maintain, euthanasia may be necessary. Some undesirable and abnormal behavior can be modified, so it is important to discuss these situations with your veterinarian. Your and your family's safety should always be taken into consideration.

Economic, emotional, and space limitations may also force an owner to consider euthanasia for a horse if a suitable home cannot be found. Discussing all possible alternatives with friends, family, and your veterinarian will help you feel more comfortable with your decision.

## How do I tell my family?

Family members may be aware of the horse's problems. You should review the information you have received from your veterinarian with them. Long-term medical care can be a burden that you and your family may be unable to bear emotionally or financially, and this should be discussed openly and honestly. Encourage family members to express their thoughts and feelings. Even if you have reached a decision, it is important that family members, especially children, have their thoughts and feelings considered.

Children have special relationships with their pets and should not be excluded from the decision-making process because they might seem too young to understand. Preventing children from participating in the process may only complicate and prolong their grief process. Children respect straightforward, truthful, and simple answers. If they are prepared adequately, children usually are able to accept a pet's death.

## Will it be painless?

Equine euthanasia is most often accomplished by injection of a death-inducing drug. Your veterinarian may administer a tranquilizer first to relax your horse. When the horse is euthanized, death will be quick and painless. If the horse is standing when the euthanasia solution is given, the horse will become unconscious and unable to sense fear or pain while still standing. The horse will then collapse; this may or may not be a smooth fall, and there can be risk of injury to people if they are standing directly in front of or behind the horse as it falls. Listen to your veterinarian's instructions on where to stand during the euthanasia procedure. In some cases, it is safer to keep your distance from your horse until it has fallen to the ground. Death occurs after the horse has become unconscious and fallen to the ground. Your horse may move its legs or head or breathe deeply several times after the drug is given, but these are reflexes and don't mean that your horse is in pain or is suffering.

## How can I say goodbye?

The act of saying goodbye is an important step in managing the natural and healthy feelings of grief and sorrow following the loss of a beloved friend and 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's best not to wait too long before having your horse euthanized.

Some horse owners choose to be present when their horses are euthanized, but others choose to say goodbye beforehand and not be present during euthanasia. This is a very personal decision and you should do what feels right for you. Do not let others pressure you into making a choice that makes you uncomfortable.

## 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.

Sometimes well-meaning family and friends may not realize how important your horse was to you or the intensity of your grief. Comments they make may seem cruel and uncaring although they were not meant to be taken that way. Be honest with yourself and others about how you feel. If you feel despair, talk to someone who will listen to your feelings about the loss of your horse. Talk about your sorrow, but also about the fun times you spent with your horse, the activities you enjoyed, and the memories that are meaningful to you.

## The stages of grief

There are many stages of grief, but not everyone experiences them all or in the same order. The stages include denial, anger, guilt, depression, acceptance, and resolution. The grief can seem to come in waves, may be brought on more intensely by a sight or sound that sparks your memory, and may seem overwhelming at times.

Your first reaction may be **denial**—an unwillingness to accept the fact that your horse has died or that death is unavoidable. Denial may begin when you first learn the seriousness of your horse's illness or injuries. Often, the more sudden the death, the more difficult the loss is to accept and the stronger the denial.

**Anger** and **guilt** often follow denial. Your anger may be directed toward people you normally love and respect, including your family, friends or your veterinarian. People coping with death will often say things that they do not really mean, unintentionally hurting those whom they do not mean to hurt. You may feel guilty or blame others for not recognizing the illness earlier, for not doing something sooner, for not being able to afford other types of or further treatment, or for being careless and allowing your horse to be injured.

**Depression** is a common experience after the death of a special animal. The tears flow, there are knots in your stomach, and you feel drained of all your energy. Day-to-day tasks can seem impossible to perform and you may feel isolated and alone. Many depressed people will avoid the company of friends and family. It might be hard to get out of bed in the morning, especially if your morning routine involved caring for your horse's needs. Sometimes you may even wonder if you can go on without your horse. The answer is yes, but there are times when special assistance may be helpful in dealing with your loss. If you are suffering from profound depression, seek professional assistance.

Eventually, you will come to terms with your feelings. You can begin to **accept** your horse's death. **Resolution** has occurred when you can remember your horse and your time with them without feeling the intense grief and emotional pain you previously felt. Acceptance and resolution do not mean that you no longer feel a sense of loss, just that you have come to terms with the fact that your horse has died.

Even when you have reached resolution and acceptance, feelings of anger, denial, guilt, and depression may reappear. If this does happen, these feelings will usually be less intense, and with time they will be replaced with fond memories.