

## When is it Time & What do I do?

Euthanasia (derived from 'eu' - meaning good, and 'thanatos' - meaning death) is a **humane** option to prevent or end suffering and pain. If your horse can no longer respond to you in the normal ways, is experiencing more pain than pleasure, is terminally ill or critically injured euthanasia is a humane option. Sometimes the financial or emotional cost of treatment is beyond your means. The lack of a good prognosis due to the limits of large animal medicine and surgery is a common factor. Economic changes for a family or space limitation may force an owner to consider the responsible and compassionate option of euthanasia if a suitable home cannot be found.

The Veterinarian cannot make this decision for you. Their role is to provide a diagnosis, prognosis and to present the various treatment options. Make sure you understand the options given to you. Ask questions; find out the approximate cost of the treatment. Keep in mind the vet does not have a crystal ball, and can only give you their best-educated opinion. They can help you to make a decision, but ultimately it is your decision. You must be at peace with it.

## Plan Ahead

It is important to determine what you can afford financially and what medical treatment is best for your horse and you. Factors such as age and severity of disease or injury need to be thoughtfully considered before they happen, not while the crisis is in front of you. This decision should ideally be made in a rational and calm frame of mind. Deciding to put down your beloved horse in a time of emergency is difficult and highly stressful. Making decision's when you are emotional and distraught may result in greater suffering for your horse and you. Knowing that you have decided that your horse is too old to have colic surgery makes the final preparations a little easier. It is also important to discuss with your vet what disposal options are available in your area and plan what you will do with the carcass. It is key to communicate your thoughts and

decisions with anyone who is responsible for the care of your horses. If you were unavailable during a crisis, waiting for you could cause undue pain and suffering for your horse and valuable time is wasted because of uncertainty. Always leave phone numbers of the veterinarian, emergency contact and written instruction on what to do in case of severe illness or catastrophic injury. If the horse is insured, permission may be needed from the carrier, so be sure that all this information is at hand and barn staff know where to find the information.

## When the Time Comes, What Happens?

It is a personal decision if you want to be present with your horse, you may not even have the option but if you do remember it is your own decision. Again think about this while your horse is healthy, to make it a little easier when the time does come. The most common method is by injecting an overdose of a barbiturate anesthetic. The horse is sedated prior to the injection of the lethal drug. This is similar to placing the horse under anesthesia. The horse loses consciousness very quickly after the injection of the barbiturate before falling to the ground. This can be upsetting, as it is difficult to control the way a 1000 lb. animal falls down. There are a number of reflexes that can be disturbing as they cause movement of the limbs or gasping. It is important to remember that the horse is unconscious and feels and knows nothing. A short time after breathing stops, the heart stops.

Another fast humane method of Euthanasia is by captive bolt or gunshot. A 22 caliber firearm is sufficient and a qualified and trained individual must perform this. It is important to know the point of entry to ensure an instant painless death. But be aware, limb movement is still possible up to three minutes after death.

Some choose to send their horses to a processing facility. However, you should be aware that your horse may need to travel long distances to reach a licensed abattoir. There are rendering facilities in BC, and these may be a better option.

## Disposal of The Carcass

Burying the horse on the farm may violate zoning laws, so you must check beforehand. You will need heavy digging machinery to dig the grave. A Thoroughbred tradition is to bury the head, heart and hooves only, as these are the parts that make a great racehorse. There may be an animal cemetery or crematorium that may be able to accommodate your horse. Another option is to have the carcass rendered. Talk to your vet and see what arrangements are commonly made in your area.

## Saying Goodbye, Coping with Your Decision, Guilt & Grief

You can say goodbye to your horse by spending time with it before it is put down, or being with it during euthanasia or just after. Saying goodbye is never easy and everyone has his or her own way. There is no right or wrong action, so don't feel pressured, do what you can comfortably live with.

Now it is done. Knowing that you have made an informed and humane decision should be of great help in easing any distress. It is important to feel and understand you made a responsible compassionate choice when your horse needed you most. Knowing that your horse is out of pain or no longer suffering can ease your burden and help you become at peace. Our greatest responsibility is never forgetting that the horse's welfare is paramount and euthanasia as hard as it may be for us, may be best for the horse.

Guilt feelings are common. We agonize over questions; did I do the right thing? should I have done more? should I have spent the money? When you own a horse, you not only take on the joys of ownership, but the sorrows as well. Remember that you are not alone and there are many other horse owners out there who you can talk to and share your feelings.

## Guilt & Grief (Continued)

Grief is natural and normal. The grieving process includes accepting that the loss, changes and accompanying feelings are painful and adjusting to them takes time. By understanding this you can be better prepared to manage your grief and help family members who are sharing your loss. You may even find this has changed your lifestyle and you need to find activities that make you feel better and are healthy.

## What About Children?

This can be especially hard. Children will form intense emotional bonds with animals and younger children may not understand the finality of death. You have to be clear, respectful, kind and straightforward when explaining to them that the horse is gone. The term "putting them to sleep" can cause problems when you realize that they think that sleep is a temporary thing, and go looking for the horse later. School counselors can be of assistance with children's grief. If they are prepared adequately, they can learn to accept an animal's death. Search for books and articles on dealing with loss and grief. There are many good titles for children and adults. Hospice societies and school counselors can be of assistance.

## Memorial

Some people establish memorials for their horses or awards for a horse show that was meaningful. Campbell Valley Park in Langley, British Columbia has a Memorial Garden, Spirit of the Horse, dedicated to our horses living and gone. A brick is purchased and placed in the garden wall. This may be an option in remembrance of your horse.



## A Final Note

Responsible horse ownership includes making the emotionally tough decisions. Your horse deserves as painless an end as possible and you alone are responsible for ensuring you have a plan and the resources to provide a humane end.

Carefully consider quality of life when giving away an older or infirm horse to its new 'forever home'. These horses require consistent veterinary and farrier care, generally more often than healthy horses and a substantial commitment of time and money to keep them comfortable.

Some of these horses, due to failing health or age related factors may struggle to integrate on a new property with other horses. This can cause undue stress and may not be in the best interest of the horse.

Euthanasia is a humane and compassionate option for elderly or infirm horses when the owner is no longer able to care for them. The welfare of the horse must be of paramount importance when making change or end of career decisions.

This brochure is intended as a place to start, for more information about euthanasia please talk to your veterinarian. For more information, visit:

<https://hcbc.ca/equine-welfare/euthanasia>



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# Euthanasia

## Making the Decision, What Happens & Dealing with Grief



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BRITISH COLUMBIA