

THE TIME HAS COME:

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT EUTHANASIA

by Dr. Stacie Boswell

Responsibly considering euthanasia (the humane ending of a horse's life) is difficult, though thinking about it in advance can help ease the emotional burden that will occur during a crisis. It helps to think of euthanasia as a gift to a beloved animal to relieve his or her suffering.

The American Association of Equine Practitioners has specific criteria for euthanasia, including that which a horse should not have to endure:

- continuous or unmanageable pain
- a medical problem with a hopeless chance of survival
- a lifetime of stall rest.

Another important consideration is the horse's ability to eat. If he is not able to maintain his weight at a body condition score of at least 4 out of 9, he either needs a different feeding regimen or he needs to be euthanized. Leaving an older horse with poor dentition standing in front of a round bale skinny and starving could be considered torture. Imagine that you are ninety years old, toothless, and are offered only tough steak and raw carrots for your meals.

During Montana's winters, a horse's ability to navigate his environment may play a role in the decision to say goodbye to him. A horse with severe arthritis, especially in his knees, will have trouble getting around in the snow. If he falls down or lays down, he may not be able to get up. It seems kinder to allow a horse to cross the rainbow bridge without suffering hours of agony unable to rise in deep snow.

The decision for euthanasia is individual and has many contributing factors. Talking with your veterinarian and all caregivers or family members may help bring you confidence when considering this difficult decision. An emergency event, such as a severe injury or colic will make the decision clear. Progressive compromise and slow demise of mobility or function give a horse's caregivers a lot of gray areas, which can lead to disagreements and strife among family members. Having conversations in advance can minimize friction when the critical time comes to say goodbye.

The two most common ways to deliver humane euthanasia are an overdose of barbiturates (anesthetic drugs, which must be administered by a veterinarian) or by gunshot to the brain. If a horse is euthanized by gunshot, it's critical to understand the anatomy specifically. I've personally had two patients who were mis-shot by an owner's acquaintance and survived (one was shot at the racetrack at the age of four, but was finally euthanized because of colic at the age of twenty-seven).

After a horse is deceased, his body can be difficult to deal with because of the size. In southwest Montana, At Home on the Range provides body pick-up, and will either bury horses on their farm or cremate them. Other services may be available in the rest of the state. In many areas, the landfill may be the only option for disposal. If a horse is euthanized with barbiturate overdose, he must be buried deeply, and local laws and regulations must be followed. Predation or scavenging will result in secondary death of wildlife. The cost of euthanasia may range from \$400-1500 depending on body aftercare options and if it is necessary because of an emergency. The United Horse Coalition may be able to help direct needy owners to financial assistance programs.

Coping with loss includes going through stages of grief which include denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance. Mourning a horse is harder if your relationship with him has encompassed years of trust as a team. Some psychological studies have shown that horse owners grieve for four to twelve months. Though thinking about losing your beloved horse is sad, knowing your options, and the conditions through which he should not be allowed to suffer helps bring closure. Because our horses are riding partners, the depth of our relationship with them means they will leave a big hole in our hearts when they are gone. Making the decision for euthanasia with the horse's best interest in mind is hard, but it is comforting to know that we really can relieve suffering.

Resources:

At Home on the Range accredited cremation and burial services, Manhattan, MT. <https://athomeontherange.net/>

406 Pet Crematory, multiple locations in Montana. <https://www.406petcrematory.com/>

American of Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) euthanasia guidelines: <https://aaep.org/guidelines/euthanasia-guidelines>

United Horse Coalition: <https://unitedhorsecoalition.org/uhc-materials/resources-for-owners/>



health >>> euthanasia



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