



RESPONSIBLE
HORSE OWNER BOOKLET

HEALTHIER
HORSES

GENERAL WELL-BEING



MSD

Animal Health

INTRODUCTION



As well as ensuring your horse's physical needs are met, it is very important to consider your horse's general well-being and environmental needs.

Domestication has changed the way horses are managed and we must remember that they are social animals that are, in general, happiest living in herds. This guide looks at the environmental needs of horses as well as covering some of the issues that you might encounter as a horse owner; stabling, paddock maintenance, deciding whether to breed from your horse and being prepared for euthanasia.

This guide is part of a series covering a range of different topics to help you keep your horses healthy.

For more information and to gain access to the rest of the series, please visit our website: www.msd-animal-health.ie and search under species Horses



THE FIVE FREEDOMS

The Five Freedoms appear in the Animal Welfare Acts.

The Code of Practice for the Welfare of Horses, Ponies, Donkeys and their Hybrids provides further information about The Animal Welfare Legislation and the responsibilities you have as an owner or loanee of a horse.

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst:

By providing enough fresh water and the right type and amount of food to keep them fit.

Horses have evolved as trickle feeders, designed to be chewing/occupied by feed for a large portion of their day. Their digestive systems are primarily designed to digest fibre and, therefore, forage (hay/haylage/grass) should represent the majority of their diet.

Ideally domesticated horses should have free access to fibre to allow them to eat for at least 16 hours per day. Clean drinking water should be available at all times.

2. Freedom from discomfort:

By making sure that animals have the right type of environment, including shelter and somewhere comfortable to rest.

While horses do need some protection from the elements – shelter, trees, barn – they do not require warm housing and have been shown to be able to comfortably tolerate low temperatures. Horses naturally insulate themselves with their winter coats; however, clipped horses may need rugs to maintain a comfortable body temperature. Anything that a horse wears, be it a rug, headcollar, bridle or saddle, needs to fit correctly and be cleaned regularly.

Horses that are in work should only be asked to do what they are capable of and what they enjoy.



3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease:

By preventing them from getting ill or injured and by making sure animals are diagnosed and treated rapidly if they do.

It is important to make sure all reasonable steps are taken to prevent ill-health and to seek prompt veterinary care in the event of illness or injury.

A preventative healthcare plan should be implemented which should include worming and vaccinations. Your vet will be able to discuss an appropriate plan for your horse. To help prevent injuries, ensure that stabling and fencing are inspected regularly and any damage is repaired.

4. Freedom from fear and distress:

By making sure their conditions and treatment avoid mental suffering.

Horses evolved as a social species living in open plains where running away was their primary method of escape from predation. Movement and grazing will naturally dominate the majority of a horse's time. Therefore, confining horses to individual stables or paddocks may be insufficient to meet their social and mental needs. Distress may result from lack of social interaction and space. It is important to avoid putting horses into situations that they might find frightening or distressing.

5. Freedom to behave normally:

By making sure animals have enough space, proper facilities and the company of other animals of their own kind.

Horses are social, nomadic animals that prefer to live and move in groups over large open areas. Horses naturally partake in mutual grooming as a means of bonding and to develop a herd hierarchy (pecking order). Unfortunately it is almost impossible to provide this type of environment for the domesticated horse and in addition it is easy to inadvertently place human needs and preferences before the needs of a horse.

Chronic frustration from isolation, lack of social contact, lack of environmental enrichment and/or lack of stimulation can result in abnormal or stereotypic behaviours ('stereotypies'). Abnormal behaviours include pacing, licking, box walking, weaving, and crib biting. Unfortunately some stereotypies become behaviours that cannot be resolved, even after the horse has been removed from the environment that initially triggered the behaviour (e.g. wind sucking).

Try and make the environment as natural as possible for your horse by ensuring they have at least one other horse to interact with and field turnout for at least some of the day. Ideally at least 4 hours per day should be spent out of the stable.

SHOULD I STABLE MY HORSE IN THE WINTER?

It is a common concern deciding whether a horse needs to be stabled during the winter, and it can be easy to inadvertently put human needs and preferences before the needs of a horse.

Horses are herd animals who are, in general, more resilient than we give them credit for. They can adapt successfully if they are given a chance to acclimatise to their surroundings.

Research has shown that horses with free access to both pasture and to box stalls with bedding, hay and water, prefer pasture even during poor weather as long as some grass is available.

If you are worried about turning your horse out in the cold, remember that it has a built-in waterproof coat and a central heating system – the digestion of fibre generates a lot of heat, keeping horses warm from the inside out. For many horses, this will be enough to keep them warm throughout the winter. For those horses that are clipped or appear to feel the cold, there are a variety of rugs available.

You will also need to consider the suitability of the land that your horse is on. If your horse's field is liable to get very wet, the ground will become poached and this could lead to hoof and lower limb problems. This might mean that it is not possible for your horse to be turned out 24 hours a day.



HOW CAN PROBLEMS BE AVOIDED?

By making sure your horse has a suitable and well-maintained environment you can help to avoid problems.

Choose a suitable environment

- Consider the workload, temperament and any health issues when deciding on the most appropriate environment for your horse
- Consider the suitability of land and whether it is likely to become waterlogged during the winter
- Where possible try to introduce any changes to your horse's environment and routine gradually
- Do not place human needs and preferences before the needs of your horse

Ensure your horse's environment is well maintained

- **Ventilation**
Ensuring stables are well ventilated will improve respiratory health and help reduce the spread of disease
- **Maintain buildings, fencing and yard areas**
Minimise the risk of injury by keeping areas tidy and by removing all potentially harmful items and materials

- Pasture management is an essential part of the day to day routine

A well-managed pasture will help to reduce any worm burden

- Remove droppings on a regular basis (preferably daily, but at least twice a week) and don't use horse manure as fertiliser (for more information on pasture management see "Parasite Control" booklet)

- Identify and remove poisonous plants

There are numerous plants that are poisonous to horses in Ireland. Generally horses will avoid a number of these unless food is scarce or if they are incorporated into hay but this should not be relied upon

- It is really important that we can identify and remove these plants so that they don't pose a risk to grazing horses

- Here are some of the common plants and trees that are poisonous to horses in Ireland:

Ragwort	Oak
Yew	Sycamore
Foxglove	Rhododendron
Buttercups	Privet

If it is necessary to keep a horse stabled then the following should occur

- Ideally, where possible, the horse should be partaking in an appropriate amount of work to maintain their ideal condition and fitness (unless the horse is confined to box rest)
- The stable should be big enough and have good ventilation
- By ensuring they have at least one other horse to interact with and field turnout for at least some of the day. Ideally at least 4 hours per day should be spent out of the stable
- Supply adequate forage so that the horse can spend at least 16 hours of the day chewing

Correct management of health issues

- If your horse has any health care issues ensure that these are appropriately managed both medically and environmentally



MAKE RESPONSIBLE DECISIONS

Breeding from your horse

- It may seem a nice idea to breed from your mare but in Ireland there are now thousands more horses than there are good homes
- It is important not to underestimate the contribution of individuals – those people who perhaps breed because they have a much-loved mare, because they want the experience of producing a youngster, or to give an out-of-work mare a role. Whilst having a foal may be very appealing, consideration needs to be given to the welfare of the foal as well as the national herd, particularly when no one can genuinely guarantee a horse a secure home for life

World Horse Welfare has produced some great information and a downloadable leaflet relating to this subject titled; 'Need to breed?' Anyone thinking of breeding from their mare is urged to read this information first.

www.worldhorsewelfare.org/Needtobreed

www.worldhorsewelfare.org/Breeding-mythbusters

Planning for euthanasia

If the worst happened and your horse suddenly got ill or injured, how many of us would know what to do?

What if the vet does everything they can but you are left with no choice but to have your horse put to sleep?

What if you are away and someone else is caring for your horse – do they know how you would like things to be handled?

Or what if your horse dies suddenly of natural causes?

Even though your horse might be young and healthy, and even though you are sure you'll have him for many years to come, it is still sensible to plan ahead. If you are keeping your horse away from home e.g. on a livery yard, ensure the yard manager or owner know how to contact you, and your preferences.

World Horse Welfare have two leaflets available, one to give you the facts, and the other to help you make a plan long before you will need it.

'Just in Case: The Facts' clearly and sensitively explains all aspects of the situation, such as the options available, what to expect, how to make the decision, insurance and legislation issues, and whether you should be there.

'Just in Case: Owner's Plan' provides a clear form which can be completed in advance. You can also use this to be certain key people know what choices you would make even if you can't be contacted in an emergency.

For more information and access to downloadable leaflets:
www.worldhorsewelfare.org/Just-in-Case

WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW?

Things to remember.

- Assess your horse's environment and needs
- Check that your buildings, fencing, yard and paddocks are well maintained
- Check the suitability of land for year round turnout
- Discuss end of life choices and ensure key people know your preferences

Where can I go for further information?

- **Your vet**
- For information on diseases and their control please visit www.msd-animal-health.ie and search under species Horses
- www.worldhorsewelfare.org





Further information
is available from:

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