



There may be an occasion when your horse will need to undergo surgery, this may be for emergency or for an elective procedure such as castration. Whatever the reason, you need to know how to care for your horse before and after surgery to ensure the surgery goes as smoothly as possible and to ensure a successful recovery afterwards.

What will I need to address before my horse has surgery?

Emergency surgery

In cases of emergency surgery the primary concerns are stabilising the horse, starting whatever initial treatment is appropriate and transporting the animal to the clinic/veterinary surgery or emergency facility.

Stabilising the horse usually involves standard emergency procedures such as controlling bleeding, stabilising fractures, controlling colic pain or whatever is appropriate for the condition at hand. Advice and direction should be sought from the clinician awaiting the horse at the clinic or from a field vet referring the horse for emergency surgery.

Your vet will administer the appropriate pain medication and antibiotics may be started in preparation for the actual surgery. Your horse should wear travel boots for transport and any horse that is physically unstable may need either a partition to lean against or an open trailer filled with plenty of shavings should it have to lie down to travel. Whether somebody travels with the horse in the box should depend entirely on whether this can be undertaken safely.

Make sure you have correct directions and some means of communication (mobile phone) in case of problems during transport. Remember to take with you any case notes which you have been given; your vet should provide you with a letter or note to give to the clinic on arrival detailing any previous treatment.

Elective surgery

This allows for more pre-planning and additional issues can be addressed. Clinicians will often request that a horse be held off food for a specified period of time before surgery. This is especially true in cases of abdominal surgery such as ovarian removal or hernia repair. The absence of large volumes of food in the intestines makes the surgeon's task much easier and lessens the chances of complications during surgery and anaesthesia. Antibiotics or other drugs may also be given to a horse prior to elective surgery. Many clinics will request that the horse is admitted the day before surgery and that all shoes are removed.

What type of care will my horse need after surgery?

Post-operative concerns generally fall into four categories and concerns about any of these areas should be directed to the attending vet:

- Diet
- Care of wounds/other surgical devices
- Exercise
- Behaviour

Remember that recovering horses can change their status quickly and you must observe your horse closely once at home. It is far better to pose a question than to overlook a potentially serious problem or complication.

Diet

Horses that have had colic or intestinal surgery must have strict attention paid to their diets. Most vets want these horses slowly changed from wet, gruel-like mash meals with small amounts of hay, to more traditional sweet feed meals and larger volumes of hay or pasture grass. The rate of return to a normal diet will depend on the particular horse, its particular surgery and rate of healing.

Other horses recovering from orthopaedic procedures or surgeries that require a restriction of exercise may require a reduction in the energy content of the diet. These horses may have to be confined to a stall and traditional high-energy diets could make these horses harder to control in such a situation. Newer low-energy diets are sometimes helpful with these cases. These horses, however, have a requirement for vitamins and minerals and for protein needed to help in their healing process, so their diets must be tailored to meet these divergent requirements. Horses are particularly at risk from abnormal gut movement

Caring for your horse before and after surgery



post-surgery, especially impactions, and need to be kept on a laxative diet with ad lib good quality forage such as haylage or hay mashes. Your vet will discuss these feeding needs with you when your horse is discharged. As the horse begins to heal and starts rehabilitation, its dietary needs will change and you must be able to anticipate this. You can seek help from a veterinary nutritionist if required.

Care of wounds/other surgical devices

Bandage care, suture line evaluation or the maintenance of any other surgical devices such as drains, catheters or casts may be required after surgery. You should receive specific instructions and training from your vet before your horse leaves the clinic - if you are still not comfortable handling your horse with some of these problems, say so! The degree of your expertise in flushing catheters, changing bandages and so forth may be the deciding factor in determining the date of homecoming for your horse.

The success of learning these management techniques and the successful recovery of many horses is directly related to the time and attention paid to them by you as an owner. Again, observation of changes in wound healing, cast pain, drainage or any number of other particulars are the prime concern and close communication between you and your vet is essential in this post-surgical phase.

Exercise

Turn out and exercise is always a question and concern for horses returning from surgery. Horses that have had bone, tendon or joint surgery may be subject to restricted exercise and may need specific hand-walking or other forms of rehabilitation. Unrestricted exercise can be a disaster in the healing of orthopaedic injuries in particular, and graduated area turnouts along with sedation are especially useful.

Some horses are better than others at rehabilitation, as are some people. It may be necessary to push some horses and others may need to be held back. The difference can be subtle and close communication is paramount. Standard restrictions for colic surgeries will be stall rest for 4-6 weeks followed by small paddock turnout for 4-6 weeks and then gradual return to exercise. Other procedures will have turnout routines tailored to the individual cases.

Behavior

Some horses tolerate stall confinement and slow rehabilitation very easily, others become agitated, angry or depressed, all of which can affect their healing process.

Once your horse has been discharged and you are taking care of him at home, you must evaluate these behavioural changes and, along with your vet, decide on an appropriate course of treatment. Medication is available for some horses that can help calm them and make confinement more tolerable. Simple changes to their environment like views of horses at pasture or additional windows, the addition of companion animals in adjacent stalls and other companions such as goats can sometimes help. The use of yards and restricted areas in front of the horse's box can also be useful. This is perhaps the least scientific of all aspects of post-surgical care and rehabilitation but, for some horses, it can be crucial.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Dalehead Veterinary Group on (01729) 823538 and we will be happy to advise you.