



Day-to-day management of your horse is very important. There are many factors that horse owners must consider to ensure their horse's health and safety. Vigilance towards these factors is essential for a beginner and the experienced owner.

What factors ensure good day-to-day equine management?

Important factors to consider when looking after your horse include, stable management, twice-daily checks and grooming, how to handle your horse's feet, tying up, leading, catching and turning-out, and fencing/pasture management.

Stable management

The stable

Being stabled is a very un-natural environment for your horse, in the wild horses are used to fresh air and freedom. To ensure your horse's happiness and comfort you must consider the following:

Good stable ventilation - this will help prevent respiratory problems

The top door of the stable should be kept open at all times, never completely shut your horse in it's stable. If your horse tends to chew on the door or window frame or has other habits that prevent keeping the top door open, consider using a mesh door; this provides both ventilation and appropriate confinement. The stable should have windows to the front and back aspects with closure facilities should the weather turn windy causing draughts. Windows also give your horse more viewpoints which helps prevent boredom. The roof should have roof-ridge ventilators or open ridge roofs with full-length cowling.

Stable size - average sizes are

10 x 10' (3 x 3m) for a pony

12 x 12' (3.6 x 3.6m) for a horse

12 x 14' (3.6 x 4.3m) for the average mare and foal

14 x 14' (4.3 x 4.3m) for horses over 16hh

16 x 16' (4.9 x 4.9m) for particularly large horses may be necessary

The height of the roof is important too, it should be high enough for your horse to rear without hitting his head; a minimum of 8-10' (2.4-3m) is recommended. Doorways must be high and wide enough to allow easy access and avoid injury.

Good stable repair is essential

Remove any sharp nails or other projections that could cause injury. Keep fixtures and fittings to a minimum. Tie rings should be placed at the horse's head height for hay nets and shoulder height for tying up (remember to use string rings, NOT bailer twine). Fixed feed mangers should be placed in a corner of the stable at shoulder height.

Bedding

There are many different types of bedding to choose from, including chopped wheat/barley straw, corrugated cardboard, hemp, paper, peat/peat moss, rubber matting, shredded wood fibre, synthetic, wood shavings and more.

Choosing the correct bedding for your horse is very important. Bedding should be dust and mould free, absorbent, supportive and easy to use and dispose of. Your choice of bedding will depend on a combination of personal preference, cost effectiveness, local availability and your horse.

A straw bedding is very traditional, looks cosy and comfortable, but it is not always the right choice; if your horse eats straw, it is worth considering another type of bedding. Straw is not easily digested and can cause impactions, it can also be dusty causing respiratory problems. Horses tend not to eat wood shavings, so this would be a safe alternative; it is important however to find good quality shavings as they can also be dusty, although dust-extracted wood shavings are now available.



Mucking out

When mucking out all droppings and wet bed should be removed. Your horse's bed should be kept deep enough to provide protection and warmth. Creating banks around the sides of the stable will help reduce draughts and the risk of your horse becoming 'cast'.

A thin bed will get dirty quickly and certainly isn't cost effective. A dirty bed can cause your horse various problems, including respiratory complications caused by fungal spores, ammonia fumes, etc and foot ailments, eg thrush. If you are going to deep litter your horse's bed it is important to make sure enough fresh bedding is added to provide a dry base; the stable should be completely cleared at least every 12 weeks.

Twice-daily checks and grooming

Whether your horse is stabled or turned out, you should check him for any signs of injury, discomfort or unusual behaviour twice a day. Early detection of any problems is essential for the general health and well-being of your horse. The best time to do these checks is while you are grooming.

Grooming is essential for keeping your horse comfortable, clean and tidy; it is also a time when you and your horse can spend time together. Grooming is also known to improve a horse's circulation and muscle tone.

Grooming the stabled horse: remove dry mud, dirt and sweat from the coat, particularly on areas where the tack will go, with a dandy brush or plastic/rubber curry comb. Use long, firm strokes in the direction of the hair. A soft body brush should be used for more delicate or bony areas such as the head and legs. Avoid brushing wet hair as this is likely to chafe the skin. Use a plastic curry comb to comb through the mane and tail. Sponge the eyes, nostrils and dock, using a separate sponge for each. Pick out the feet, working from the heel to the toe and wash the mud off the hoof wall.

Grooming the grass-kept horse: essentially the same procedure is needed, although avoid over-grooming; a grass-kept horse will benefit from keeping the natural grease in its coat, this will provide extra protection against the outdoor elements.

How to handle your horse's feet

Horses learn to have their feet picked up relatively easily. A horse thrives on routine, so try to pick up the feet in the same order each time. Starting with one of the front feet, stand close by the side of your horse, facing the tail, run your hand down the leg while leaning into your horse slightly with your shoulder, this alerts the horse to shift its weight to the opposite foot and then your horse should automatically pick up the foot on your side. If this is successful, then ask for the hind foot on the same side and work around the horse from there. If your horse is reluctant to lift his feet, your farrier or vet can show you a spot just above the fetlock where a gentle pinch of a nerve will almost certainly result in him lifting his foot.

Restraint

When handling your horse you should use a regular head collar and lead rope. When tying the lead rope, it should be tied to a string ring which will easily snap, avoiding injury, should your horse pull back; DO NOT use bailer twine, it is too strong. Make sure the string ring is tied to a wall attachment, fixed fence or other fixed object at the horse's head height or higher, and keep the tie rope short. The horse should be tied so it is unable to move so far that it could turn, get a leg over the rope or simply back quickly and far enough to injure itself. When tying the lead rope to the string ring, use a quick-release knot (see below), this can be undone quickly with one hand in an emergency.

Leading

When leading a horse you should walk level with the horse's head and neck to avoid being trodden on if the horse suddenly moves sideways. Tie a knot in the end of the lead rope to prevent it being pulled through your hand and hold up the spare end with your other hand - NEVER wrap the rope around your hand! When leading on the road it is safer for the horse to wear a bridle, this will ensure greater control. Make sure you walk between your horse and the traffic - any other position would be very dangerous. For safety wear durable gloves, a hard hat and some form of reflective wear.



Catching and turning-out

Always approach a loose horse in a relaxed yet confident manner, avoid any sudden movements or noise and talk to the horse to warn of your approach. Hide the halter behind you and walk towards the horse's shoulder from a position where the horse can see you, NEVER approach a horse from behind. Once the horse is standing still, stand alongside him and put the lead rope over the neck and carefully put on the halter. Reluctant horses will usually give in if they are left out alone but if your horse is reluctant and turns away from you, walk away from him as if you do not want him, he is likely to follow and give in eventually. If tit-bits are necessary, take them in your pocket and reward your horse once he has been caught. Avoid taking a bucket of food to the field if there is more than one horse, this can lead to competition and fighting.

When turning a horse out, never let it charge away from you when you release the halter, you could break your fingers or be vulnerable to being kicked. Walk into the field, close the gate and turn your horse towards it, making him stand and wait before releasing the halter. When releasing the halter hold the mane at the poll or simply pass the lead rope around the neck and put some pressure on it to let the horse know that it is still restrained while you take the halter off. When you are ready, slowly let go of the mane or release the rope from around the horse's neck, step back and let the horse walk off.

Fencing and pasture management

Fencing

The quality of fencing in your horse's field should be considered carefully. Ideally materials such as wooden posts and rails, flexible synthetics, smooth taut wire, etc should be used at a minimum height of 4' 6" (1.4 m). Fencing should be very strong, with well-sunk, secure posts, be non-toxic and easy to maintain. Do not use the following types of fencing - barbed wire, square mesh, chicken wire, metal railings or wooden palings.

Thick, high, prickly hedges also make adequate fencing and are ideal windbreaks; all hedging and fencing should be checked daily for any holes, fallen posts or broken rails/wire. Field gates should be sturdy, safe, easy to open and secure. Ideally all gate openings should open onto private roads/property and those on public highways should be safely blocked off. A field shelter is a welcome addition to your horse's field, providing shelter from the elements in winter and from flies in the summer; this will also need to be checked regularly for damage.

Pasture management

A good starting point is having an area of land big enough for the number of horses living on it; the average size is 1 acre per horse (approx 4046m²). Horse droppings contaminate the pasture with parasites if they are not removed regularly. Removing droppings is the most important element in preventing parasite infestation which means a regular deworming regimen is less effective if droppings are not removed from the pasture at least once a week. It is also important to monitor the pasture for poisonous plants, particularly Ragwort which is very common. Many plants that are poisonous to horses cause neurological and liver damage which can be life-threatening. Cutting or topping any long, rank areas of pasture as they appear will encourage even growth and grazing.

Harrowing areas of pasture is another possibility if it is not practical to remove droppings on a regular basis. Harrowing breaks up the manure and spreads it around the pasture; this is only advisable in hot, dry conditions where exposed parasite eggs are killed by the heat. In damp conditions, harrowing simply spreads the eggs and larvae over the pasture, increasing the chance of being ingested by horses.

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.