



We are all familiar with the phrase "A healthy horse is a happy horse" - but there is probably also something to be said for keeping your horse happy in order to maintain its health. If you know your horse you will probably quickly recognise the signs that suggest it is not well.

What are the signs of good health?

A healthy animal will have bright eyes, no discharge from ears, eyes or nose and be interested in what is going on around it. It should have a good appetite and eat without difficulty. The amount of food an animal eats varies a lot between individuals - if your horse's weight remains constant then it is eating the right amount of food. You should be concerned if your horse's appetite or water consumption suddenly changes, or your horse suddenly starts to gain or lose weight. There should be regular passage of dung and urine - this will vary with diet.

When in good condition a horse's coat should be shiny, soft, clean and free of parasites. There should be no evidence of rubbing or irritation. The horse or pony should be sound when walking and trotting in-hand or free in a paddock.

How do I keep my horse in good health?

To keep your horse in good condition it must be fed a healthy diet appropriate to its exercise demands. Mental stimulation in the form of an interesting environment and opportunities to interact with other horses is also important, along with regular exercise in the form of ridden/lunge work or free exercise in the field. Overexercise and underexercise are both detrimental.

Grooming your horse every day to remove mud and dust is important, however regular shampooing is not recommended as this removes essential oils which are needed to maintain a healthy coat and skin. All horses and ponies should have their feet picked out and examined thoroughly at least once a day. Their feet require regular trimming every 4-8 weeks and, if shod, proper farriery at this interval.

How much exercise does my horse need?

Regular exercise is important to keep all animals healthy. Most horses exercise themselves to a certain degree when turned out at grass. The amount of exercise a horse needs depends on the individual and the type of work the horse is expected to undertake. Horses that are expected to work at specific levels, eg hunting, showjumping, eventing, will need additional exercise in the form of schooling and hacking to work up to a specific level of fitness.

If your horse is stabled due to lack of grazing you will need to ensure that your horse is walked, for example on a horse-walker or in hand at regular intervals during the day; regular movement allows your horse to maintain mobility, especially if they are susceptible to stiff joints due to arthritis or other musculoskeletal disorders. Horses stabled due to injury may or may not need exercise; this will depend on their injury and the instructions given to you by your vet.

What is a healthy diet?

A healthy diet is a balanced diet containing all the nutrients your horse requires. Dietary requirements change with age and may also be affected if your horse is suffering from some diseases. As horses get older they may lose muscle mass and gain weight more easily. Overweight horses have a higher risk of diseases such as arthritis and laminitis.

A great deal of information is available from reputable feed companies on their products and how to use different constituents to make up a balanced diet. Owners with limited knowledge of equine nutrition are better to feed commercially made diets at the recommended levels than to pick and mix. Animals in full work, under stress, ill or ageing will benefit from being fed a good, well-balanced vitamin and mineral supplement. Do not be tempted to feed multiple supplements as it is not only wasteful and unnecessary but could potentially cause harmful interactions. Check your horse's weight on a regular basis to make sure it is not overweight. If your horse is either overweight or underweight you will need to alter the diet to enable your horse to maintain the appropriate bodyweight for its size. Your vet will be able to help you devise a feeding regimen to help in these situations.



What is routine health care?

There are a number of measures that can help prevent your horse developing diseases. You should discuss these options with your vet to work out the best plan for your horse.

All horses have worms at some stage in their life and many will be re-infected unless they are given regular, routine worming treatment and correct management. Severe infestations can be life threatening but even lower rates of infection can cause malabsorption of the diet, loss of weight and increased incidence of colic. A worm control programme is relatively simple and inexpensive so there is no excuse not to undertake regular treatment with a wormer. Most veterinary surgeons will supply you with a worm control programme that can be tailored to your needs. Make sure your horse is wormed according to the manufacturer's dosage recommendations and on a regular basis year round.

Along with worming it is essential to practice good pasture management with regular dung removal from paddocks, careful rotation of animals onto 'clean' pasture, worming and isolation of new arrivals and batching of age groups. Your veterinary surgeon will again be able to advise you on this.

There are a number of highly infectious and, in some cases, potentially fatal diseases that can affect horses. In the UK vaccinations are available against influenza, herpesvirus, tetanus and strangles. All horses and ponies should be vaccinated against tetanus. The other diseases are highly contagious and many authorities, including the Jockey Club and FEI, require animals that compete in their competitions or use their premises to be vaccinated. Many livery yards and riding schools will also require all the animals on their premises to be vaccinated. If your horse or pony regularly mixes with others at hunts, shows or competitions they should be vaccinated. All vaccinations require an initial course and then regular boosters. Your veterinary surgeon can advise you and document that the animal has been vaccinated.

Domesticated horses find themselves in conditions very different to those in the wild which affect the growth and wear of their teeth. Domestication, change in diet and using a bit alter the way your horse lives, eats and chews. Your horse should receive regular 6-12 monthly checks by your vet or equine dentist to look for a variety of common problems, including cracked teeth, mouth ulcers and sore areas of mucosa, gum inflammation, problems with tooth eruption, sharp tooth edges and hooks, tooth misalignments, etc. Older animals will require more regular attention.

Castration is one of the most commonly performed equine surgical procedures which is undertaken to remove the testicles of a colt or stallion. It prevents, or decreases male sexual behaviour, renders the horse more docile and manageable and prevents reproduction. Castration can be undertaken at any age, but management practices usually dictate castration at 6 months to 2 years old before sexual behaviour commences. Castration of suckling foals has some advantages.

How do I know if my horse is unwell?

Any changes in your horse's behaviour or temperament, altered appetite or water consumption, or the presence of signs such as lameness, nasal discharge, coughing, colic or diarrhoea should alert you to the fact that there may be a problem with your horse. You should consult with your veterinary surgeon if you feel that your horse or pony is unwell. All wounds, abrasions and swellings should be investigated. If you are unsure of their significance, ask for advice.

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.