

HORSE 19

Care of the companion horse



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Care of the companion horse

The companion horse gives company and stability to your working horse, and with consideration and planning you can give a non-ridden horse or pony a great quality of life too. Most enjoy the social aspects of belonging to your 'herd' and can join in with many activities.

Vaccinations

All horses should receive tetanus vaccination. Tetanus is a killer, we see very little of it these days and this is due to vaccination. Those who never come into contact with strange horses may not need influenza vaccination but be guided by your vet on this. It is an ideal time for a health check because the vet should always assess the horse's health before vaccinating and an annual check over will give you peace of mind.

Nutrition

The most natural way to feed your non-ridden horse or pony is to provide all his needs through fibre feed. That is hay, haylage and grass or chaff feeds.

Unless you are struggling to keep weight on your horse avoid cereal feeds. Especially for native breeds!



Vitamin and mineral imbalances can be easily met with broad spectrum supplements, or one can have the soil analysed and supplement specifically. Remember 'meals' were introduced to feed hard working horses in the past. We now know that horses' systems need food 'little and often' in the form of fibre.

Maintaining correct body condition

It is vital that we all learn to recognise what is a good weight. For horses and ponies living out in the summer you should be able to easily feel their ribs, and in the winter you should be able to SEE them! Horses living in a part stabled routine can be kept at a more even weight, but you must always be able to feel ribs. For the horse that does not 'work', ie riding or driving, the lack of exercise is most likely to cause problems of weight gain.

Obesity is a growing problem and causes much suffering to many horses. Common related problems are laminitis and Equine Metabolic Syndrome, Insulin Resistance which is similar to human diabetes, early onset arthritis, and wind and heart problems. Often people think that getting a small native pony as a companion will be the easy answer, but you may be sentencing it to a life of disease if you are unprepared.

Natives, especially Shetlands, need a very careful grazing regime. Their systems have adapted to survive in

the harshest climates and as a result the combination of milder climates, rich pasture with ryegrasses, rugging, stabling and, worst still, feeding concentrate feeds, creates a potentially lethal mix. You really can kill with misplaced kindness.

Ponies need to be kept on 'poor' pasture with low nutritional value, and you need to have the facilities to keep them off the grass at least by day, in spring, summer and autumn. A stable is fine for shorter times, but for long stretches will restrict mental and physical activity. It does not need to be complicated – an enclosed yard or corral area is ideal for longer periods. Horses and ponies kept off grass for periods longer than four hours will need to be fed some fibre to keep their hind gut healthy – hay or low calorie high fibre chaff or chop feeds will need to be fed as part of a controlled diet.

Once a pony has developed a susceptibility to laminitis the regime needs to be stricter still – for life! – see the pet care leaflet Laminitis (H14).

Loss of body condition can still be an issue, particularly with the less hardy breeds such as Thoroughbreds and Arabians. These animals have thinner coats and naturally more sensitive skin and as such are susceptible to extremes of weather. They will lose weight if they are exposed

to continuous rain and wind in the winter or are unable to get away from the flies in the summer – when they may resort to attempting to run away from the flies. A good form of shelter is essential for these types of horse. Natural trees and hedges may not be enough.

If the horse does unexpectedly lose condition it would be sensible to ask your vet to give him a health check. This will eliminate teeth problems, and ensure that there is no worm burden, disease or pain that is affecting his body. An older companion horse may start to carry less weight as its systems become less efficient – see the pet care leaflet Care of the older horse (H20).



Exercise for the non-ridden companion

The horse is designed to spend the majority of its day walking and grazing, therefore most companions will need at least all day or all night turned out to pasture.

If body condition is not a problem then 24 hour turnout is the most natural lifestyle. However as modern horses are bred to work they usually enjoy a routine of 'coming in' regularly and having some attention and interaction.

While a horse which is working hard can manage on long periods of stabling, the companion horse should not be expected to live permanently in a stable except if sick, lame or in exceptionally bad weather conditions. If possible, turn out in a riding arena or safe yard will break the monotony and give the horse the opportunity to exercise. Some form of daily exercise is essential.

Leading out

Many horses enjoy a safe walk in company, either led from another horse or led in-hand. For young horses it is great education; ensuring they have the skills to be led and handled is something the horse owner owes his horses.

How much they do depends on their education, fitness and soundness.

Lunging and long-lining

These really are only suitable for young animals likely to be trained to be ridden. It is useful for most horses to understand how to be lunged should the vet need to assess soundness, but it is hard work on the joints of the horse and most non-ridden companions are not ridden due to lameness, so lunging would not be beneficial.

Natural Horsemanship activities

If the horse is completely sound you may wish to engage in Natural Horsemanship activities. It is essential to be trained by a good horseman to do this – not all methods will suit all horses.

Related Blue Cross publications

The following leaflets from the pet care series may be useful.

- The field-kept horse (H5)
- Feeding and watering (H7)
- Routine healthcare for horses (H8)
- Common ailments (H12)
- Care of the older horse (H20)
- Euthanasia (H21)

Happy, healthy pets

Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at www.bluecross.org.uk

Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.



Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk



Blue Cross head office
Shilton Road, Burford, Oxon OX18 4PF

Telephone: 0300 777 1897
Fax: 0300 777 1601
Email: info@bluecross.org.uk

www.bluecross.org.uk



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