

Horse Care

Horses have many unique personality traits, but main traits are typically categorized as social, aloof, challenging, and fearful. Note that these traits are not negative, rather, will help owners examine behavior and determine the best care and handling for their horse. For example, a challenging horse may exploit timid or unsure handlers, while an aloof horse may tolerate poor handling. A fearful horse may require more patience, while a social horse may welcome any interaction – human or horse. Their unique personalities, large size, and owner involvement can make them challenging to keep, but a little extra knowledge will help you and your horses live harmoniously together. Read on for more information about how to keep your horses happy and healthy.



Basics

The average life span for horses is about 25-30 years, depending on breed and overall health. While a horse over 15 years is often considered to be a “senior” horse, with advancements in veterinary care and nutrition, we are now seeing horses live into their mid-20s and 30s. A horse’s normal body temperature ranges from 99-101°F. Size and weight vary broadly depending on breed and sex, but horses typically weigh between 840 and 2,200 pounds. A horse’s height is measured in “hands,” where 1 hand is equal to 4 inches – an average sized horse stands approximately 15.2 hands.

Male horses are called “geldings” if castrated; “stallions” if not, while females are called “mares,” regardless of if they are spayed. Many owners choose to forego spaying their mares, since castrating males is quite necessary due to stallion temperament upon reaching sexual maturity. The castration procedure for a stallion is quite simple, and rather quick – in both procedure and recovery. Spaying a female, however, is more difficult and could lead to complications.

Behavior

Horses are extremely social herd animals, and require the company of other horses to be happy and healthy. Horses have been known to form strong pair-bond relationships that can last a lifetime – these

bonds not only provide necessary socialization, but protection from predators as well. Because horses form tight bonds and friendships, they feel great loss when they are separated from their partner. It's highly recommended to adopt horses in pairs, or to adopt a horse to introduce to your horse, for this reason. Horses are also known to have exceptional memory – they can remember both horse and human friends for their entire life. If a horse is treated kindly, he/she often remembers the person who treated him/her kindly, even after much time has passed. Likewise, if a horse is treated poorly or taken to a place where it had a bad experience, it can cause anxiety and nervousness. Research has also shown that horses can recognize human emotions, and even can even remember your voice.

By nature, horses are grazers, meaning that that tend to eat roughage. Good quality hay and / or pasture is sufficient for keeping your horses' basic nutrition needs met, and many horses are also fed grain (in the form of pellets) to provide additional protein, vitamins, and minerals.



Space

Your horses will need a shelter that offers protection from the elements – wind, rain, snow, and sun. This can be a simple three-sided structure with the open side facing away from prevailing winds, or a fully enclosed barn and stall. Shelters should be properly ventilated; cold, wet or hot, moist conditions indoors can result in health issues. Remove soiled bedding daily, and replace it with plenty of clean, dry materials to keep your horses comfortable. The size of your shelter will depend on a variety of factors, but common practices suggest a 12x12 space for each horse. An average sized horse could also be comfortable in a 10x12 space, or even a 10x10 space. Shelter is also important in the event of an injury or illness, as your veterinarian may suggest putting your horse on stall rest. Again, this space will depend largely on your horses' personalities, whether or not they have access to pasture, etc.



Your horse's outdoor area should provide about 1 to 2 acres per horse, but this can vary depending on the quality of the pasture, local weather, and seasonality, and the amount of supplemental feed. Fencing and gates that can stand up to the strength and tonnage of horses are a must. The most commonly used fencing materials include rail (plank or PVC), and various forms of galvanized and vinyl coated wire. Fences should be 4-6 feet high, dependent on surroundings. Whatever material you choose, it should be highly visible, durable, and safe for contact by horses.

Diet

Horses are non-ruminant herbivores, meaning they only have one stomach, as opposed to a ruminant's four stomach chambers. Their digestive system can be broken down into two parts: the foregut (stomach and small intestine), and hindgut (large intestine, cecum, and colon). A horse's stomach is only able to hold 2-3 gallons at a time, which makes it the smallest stomach in relation to body size of all domestic animals. This is because a horse's stomach is built to have small amounts of forage throughout the day, as opposed to 1 or 2 large meals. Domestication has resulted in changes to the way horses are fed. Depending on how big the meal is, and what it is, feed may stay in a horse's stomach for as little as 15-30 minutes. Horses also have very sensitive stomachs, so it's important to introduce any diet changes gradually over a period of time.



Because horses are herbivores and have a unique digestive tract, they have specific dietary needs. Horses need a high fiber diet since they eat many small meals – in fact, they spend most of their time eating and grazing! The act of chewing and digesting actually helps keep horses warm in colder weather. A horse's natural diet consists of grass and tender plants. Good pasture contains most of the nutrients a horse needs to stay healthy. Of course, it's near impossible to have lush pasture year round, so good quality hay is a nice addition to your horse's diet. Because timothy hay is often not consistent from batch to batch, it's a good idea to introduce new hay slowly. Here at Charlie's Acres, when we get a new delivery of hay, we feed $\frac{1}{4}$ new hay and $\frac{3}{4}$ old hay for about a week, then $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$, and finally, $\frac{3}{4}$ new and $\frac{1}{4}$ old until all old hay is used.

Many horse owners also supplement pasture and hay with pelleted feed. Ask your equine veterinarian to help you come up with a suitable diet for your horses! At Charlie's Acres, we feed Elk Grove Stable Mix in the morning to both of our horses – we soak these pellets overnight as well, to ensure our horses can easily digest them without complication. Pellets are often used to help horses gain or hold weight, and are an easy way to feed any medications or supplements your horse may need. For example, Dakota gets a daily joint supplement that can simply be mixed into his soaked pellets.

Horses also require salt and mineral supplements which come loose or in block form, and can be free-fed. Provide salt, and / or a mineral blend appropriate for your region (check with your local large animal vet or extension office to learn more about possible mineral deficiencies in your area).

Any changes to your horses' diet should be made gradually over time, as a sudden switch can cause serious digestive issues. Clean, fresh water should always be available to your horses – they can drink up to 10 gallons a day!

Health care and maintenance

Consult your local equine veterinarian to determine the correct vaccines and vaccination schedule for your horses. Your veterinarian will be best able to help you decide what the best vaccines are for your horses given age, lifestyle, and needs. Common vaccinations protect against rabies, West Nile virus, tetanus, and

equine influenza, among other things as needed. Your horse should also be de-wormed for their protection. Work with your equine vet to establish the best vaccination and deworming schedule for your horses, as well as a dental plan.

Hoof maintenance is of the utmost importance! You will need to pick your horses' hooves regularly to help prevent against hoof rot like thrush (in wet weather), and to dislodge any foreign objects such as rocks and pebbles. Hoof picking is a great time to assess your horse's feet, legs, and hooves, and regular picks help keep an eye on any issues that may arise. The more time you spend doing this, the more comfortable you (and your horse) will be, and you can prevent any issues by keeping a close eye on things. A farrier is also needed to help with horse shoes, and / or regular hoof maintenance. Here at Charlie's Acres, both of our horses are barefoot (meaning they do not wear shoes), but a farrier visits approximately every 6-8 weeks to do trimming, filing, and overall hoof maintenance. Your equine vet can likely recommend a good farrier who will be able to assist with and answer any questions regarding your horse's needs.



Perform regular health checks on your horses! Start as soon as you and your horse are comfortable, so they get used to being haltered, handled, and having all parts of their body touched. Daily grooming is a great way to practice this – it's a perfect opportunity to get hands and eyes on your horse, help your horse relax, and helps the strengthen the bond between you and your horse. Daily grooming helps prevent health issues such as thrush, scratches, and can help you identify anything out of the ordinary.

At Charlie's Acres, these grooming sessions are when we perform our health checks. With the ability to have our hands on our horses, we can look for anything from sensitivity, rashes / cuts / scrapes, lesions or bumps, and swelling. This has helped us identify potential problems before they become major issues, which has been a great preventative measure for us! Once a month, we also weigh our horses and check them from nose to tail, as allowed and applicable.

Here are some of the things we look for:

Eyes	discharge, excessive tearing, foreign bodies
Ears	discharge, foreign bodies, odors
Nose	discharge, foreign bodies, sores
Mouth	odors, scabs/sores, sensitivity

Abdomen	lumps/masses, fluid build-up, sensitivity, tautness
Butt/tail	cleanliness, lumps/masses, discoloration
Legs	heat, swelling, joint enlargement/stiffness, sores
Hooves	cracks, heat, debris, sores/wounds, odors, overgrown hooves

Connect with your equine veterinarian and farrier to come up with the best schedule and routine for you horses, and don't forget that daily grooming can help prevent a wide array of issues that can be serious if not caught quickly!



Common ailments

Due to their size, sensitive digestive system, and varying additional factors, horses are subject to a wide array of ailments and injuries. The key to treating any issues that may arise is quick diagnosis and treatment – always check with your equine vet to come up with the best plan for your specific horse!

One common ailment in horses, due to their sensitive stomachs, is colic. Colic is essentially a blockage within in the digestive system, causes extreme abdominal pain, and is extremely life threatening. In fact, colic is the top medical cause of death in horses today. Because there are many different causes of colic, it can be difficult to determine the cause behind a colicky horse, what type of colic you may be dealing with, and exactly where the problem is inside the horse. Being able to recognize signs and symptoms of early colic will allow the greatest chance of recovery. Some early signs of colic include: restlessness or excessive rolling, profuse sweating, pawing at the ground, refusing to eat / decreased appetite, increased breath rate, and lack of bowel movements. If you suspect your horse may be showing signs of colic, contact your equine vet immediately.

Equine Arthritis and Degenerative Joint Disease (DJD) are ailments that most commonly strike aging horses, however, horses of any age can begin to show signs of arthritis. Arthritis is progressive and permanent deterioration of cartilage, the specific type of cartilage that lines the ends of bones where they come together to form a joint. As arthritis sets in and cartilage becomes compromised, signs such as stiffness and lameness may begin to appear in your horse. Arthritis is a very common ailment in horses, responsible for approximately 60% of lameness cases. While all horses are susceptible to arthritis, and there is no cure, you can take preventative measures to help ensure your horse stays comfortable and pain-free. Consult your equine vet to see if any joint supplements, medications, or treatments would be appropriate should your horse show signs of arthritis.

While ailments and injuries will vary depending on a horse's breed, age, and even location, the key to successfully combating any issues is early recognition and prevention. Daily grooming and hands on care can help assist with this, as well as working closely with a knowledgeable equine veterinarian, and farrier. Report any unusual activity or symptoms to your vet immediately, who will help determine the best course of action.

