

British
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Responsibilities of horse ownership

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Rachel Murray has been based at the Animal Health Trust, Newmarket since 1997, where she leads the orthopaedic research and is responsible for running the equine magnetic resonance imaging diagnostic service. She has owned and ridden horses throughout her life, including attending pony club, riding club and training through the British Horse Society exam system; teaching and competing up to advanced level. She attained a Silver Medal at the European student championships while training in veterinary medicine at the University of Cambridge. After graduating she spent time working in the USA, where she specialised in equine surgery, and worked with a wide variety of horses and owners, before returning to the UK in 1994 to work as the equine surgeon at Cambridge Veterinary School. She has a particular interest in sport horse injuries and performance, remains on the BHS instructors register and continues to assist owners and riders with dressage. She is married to another vet, has 2 daughters, 3 ponies and 2 dressage horses that she trains.

Owning a horse is both a privilege and a responsibility. These responsibilities include those to the horse itself, to other members of the public and to the environment.

Responsibilities to the horse

Ownership can be extremely rewarding but prospective owners need to realise the extensive commitment in both time and money that being a responsible horse owner entails, because the horse is entirely dependent on its caretaker for its welfare. An owner is responsible for the horse's quality of life, and should do their utmost to ensure the horse's welfare. The most important thing that a new owner can do is to learn as much as possible about horse management and care. Love alone is not enough as sadly, the most common reason for cruelty is ignorance. An owner should ensure that they are aware of the essential requirements of a horse, both physically and mentally, including a basic understanding of horse behaviour.

- **Nutrition and shelter:** It is critical that clean, fresh water is made available at all times, including breaking the ice in winter. Feeding a balanced diet, with concentrates fed little and often is important, but overfeeding can be as harmful as underfeeding, so more is not always better, and advice from an experienced stable manager, nutritionist or veterinarian is recommended. Shelter from bad weather needs to be accessible, whether a building or thick hedge/trees. An owner must ensure that there is adequate fencing surrounding the horse's field to avoid injuries from either entanglement in the fencing or because the horse has escaped. An owner needs to ensure that their horse does not have access to any poisonous plants.
- **Contentment:** Horses are creatures of habit, so maintaining a routine is important for their mental well-being. Long gone will be those lie-ins until lunch time, as the horse will need to be fed at the same times each day, or spontaneous long weekends away until you can employ the services of an experienced and dependable caretaker (with your contact numbers and those of your veterinarian)! Horses are often happier if they have company – but having 2 horses that are totally devoted to each other can be a nightmare if you attempt to separate them. Boredom can lead to stress and stereotypic behaviours. Leaving a horse restricted to a stable without stimulation for long periods is associated with stress as well as potential for physical deterioration.

- **Health:** Horses should be checked daily for health, and if there is any variation from normal, the horse should be assessed by a veterinarian. Regular vaccination and worm control (including removal of droppings from the field) are essential for the health of your own horse and any other horses in contact. Feet should be trimmed or shod on a regular basis by a good farrier, and feet need to be picked out daily to ensure health of the feet. An owner should be familiar with the principles of first aid in horses – and have a first aid kit accessible in case of an emergency.
- **Safety:** Ensure that any toxic substances are out of reach of your horse (they have a long reach!), and do not leave any sharp objects including wire, glass or pitchforks where a horse might injure itself. Electrical plugs and cords are very tempting for a horse to taste or chew, with potentially disastrous consequences. If an electric cable does have to be used within reach (for example for clipping) then a circuit breaker should always be used. Precautions against fire should always be undertaken.
- **Use:** It is important that a horse is fit for the purpose for which it is to be used. Taking an obese horse on a 10 mile ride when it has not been ridden for months is obviously detrimental to the horse – risking illness and injury. However, over-training a young dressage horse that has not enough muscle strength and development to support the movements that the rider is demanding also has welfare implications. It is therefore essential that an owner seeks advice from an experienced trainer in the levels of fitness required for the type of sport that a horse will undertake and how to attain these fitness levels.
- **Euthanasia:** This is perhaps the ultimate responsibility of an owner to their horse. There are many reasons why a horse may have to be put-down, including serious illness, injury, unsoundness or old age. This is likely to be a difficult and traumatic decision, and should not be undertaken lightly. However, it is the responsibility of an owner to ensure the long-term interests and welfare of the horse, which should outweigh every other consideration. When a horse reaches the end of its active life, consideration must be given to whether the horse can be provided with a good quality of life in retirement or whether it would be kinder to have the horse humanely destroyed. As it is increasingly more difficult to retire a horse to a rest home, a retired horse may face an uncertain future, and so it is often kinder to have a horse put-down than to risk it suffering an uncertain fate.

Responsibilities to others

A horse is a heavy, unwieldy object with a strong instinctive flight response. Riding or handling a horse in a public place is potentially dangerous to others, particularly if the handler is inexperienced or ill equipped. It is therefore the responsibility of the owner to ensure that the horse is under control, to plan ahead to avoid potential use of the horse as a lethal missile, and to behave with courtesy to others. This would include riding or leading on bridlepaths and roads, handling at a show ground and provision for adequate fencing at home to prevent escape onto a road.

A horse is a herd animal and interactions between horses are therefore likely to occur in situations where more than one horse comes together. It is important for an owner to be aware of the potential for serious problems if these interactions are not carefully controlled. Turning a new horse out into a group of other horses will lead to initial interactions to establish a 'pecking order'. However, these can be violent and old, sick or young horses may end up being bullied. If your horse is turned out in a group, responsibility would extend to ensuring that your horse is not bullying others (or being bullied). Ownership of a stallion entails particular responsibilities in relation to interaction with other horses.

Responsibilities to the environment

Horses have big feet, and are not particularly careful about how they use them! Riding through wet ground will inevitably churn it up, which is bad enough if it is your own property, and you are able to repair the damage, but it is potentially irresponsible to continue to churn up a public right of way in wet weather making it unusable for others.

Horses do (or should!) produce large quantities of droppings and waste bedding. It is the responsibility of a horse owner to dispose of this waste in an appropriate way without contamination of the environment, including avoiding pollution of water courses.

Summary

The rewards of horse ownership are immense, but ownership does carry considerable responsibility, which should not be undertaken lightly and without investing significant time in learning the basics of horse care and welfare.