

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



THE FIELD-KEPT HORSE



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Horses and ponies generally like to live out on grass for much of the time. This is when they enjoy the freedom to graze, interacting with other horses and generally exhibiting 'normal' horse habits and behaviour.



The environment in which a horse is kept can affect its physical health and mental wellbeing, whether stabled or living out (or a combination of both). Therefore, careful consideration should be given to providing the best possible environment to suit the individual horse's needs.

Most horses and ponies thrive on being kept out on grass for as much time as possible. However, keeping a horse permanently on grass can be as time consuming for the owner as it is to keep a horse partly housed. For example, time spent mucking out a stable may be replaced by an increase in the time spent removing droppings in the field, maintaining the pasture and repairing fencing. It may also be necessary to spend time restricting the grazing area and installing temporary fencing, to prevent horses from becoming too fat or from suffering laminitis whilst at grass.

Preparing the land

Fencing

Safe and secure fencing is essential, to prevent injury to horses and to minimise the risk of straying. Hedging alone (even where well-maintained) is rarely sufficient protection from straying, so a secondary fence line is usually required. Various types of fencing are available, ranging from wooden post and rail to plastic rails, electric tape, plain wire and mesh.

Whichever type of fencing is used this must be constructed soundly and well-maintained to ensure that it remains safe and secure. The choice of fencing is influenced by the lie of the land, the type of horses being kept and any existing fencing. When choosing fencing, take into account how permanent it will be. If the field structure is going to be changed, or if strip grazing is going to be implemented, it is easier to use electric tape and temporary posts.

Gates and gateways

Gates need to be at least 3.6 m wide and should open inwards for safety. Metal is better for maintenance and is also lighter to handle. Metal gates with a mesh lower half are preferable, as the mesh prevents horses from putting their legs through the rungs.

Hinges and latches should be secure and safe. They should not protrude into the field, where they could



cause injury. Gates should open easily, but steadily, being fixed in such a manner as to give complete control to the operator without risk of either slamming against a horse or swinging beyond the reach of the handler.

Where several horses are turned out together, or where gateways open on or close to a highway, a double-gate enclosure system should be used, to reduce the risk of horses escaping.

Ideally, gates should be located away from water troughs, shelters and corners of the field where horses may congregate. The ground in these areas rapidly becomes poached during the winter months, and this may affect safe access into and out of the field.

Pasture

The pasture should be appropriate for the type and number of horses it must sustain. It should have a good mix of grasses and herbs, providing a thick cover that will help protect the ground from being churned up by horses' hooves. However, equally, it should not be too rich or lush for those individuals that are prone to weight gain, obesity and laminitis.

Generally, a minimum space of 0.4 ha (hectares) per horse is required and, where 24-hour turn-out is planned, additional land may be needed to allow for effective rotation of grazing.

Pasture must be checked regularly for the appearance of poisonous plants and, if necessary, measures taken to control them. Ragwort, for example, is extremely hazardous to horses, whether eaten fresh or when cut and dried. It must be removed from any areas to which horses have access and safely disposed of by burning. Gloves should be worn when handling ragwort.

Water

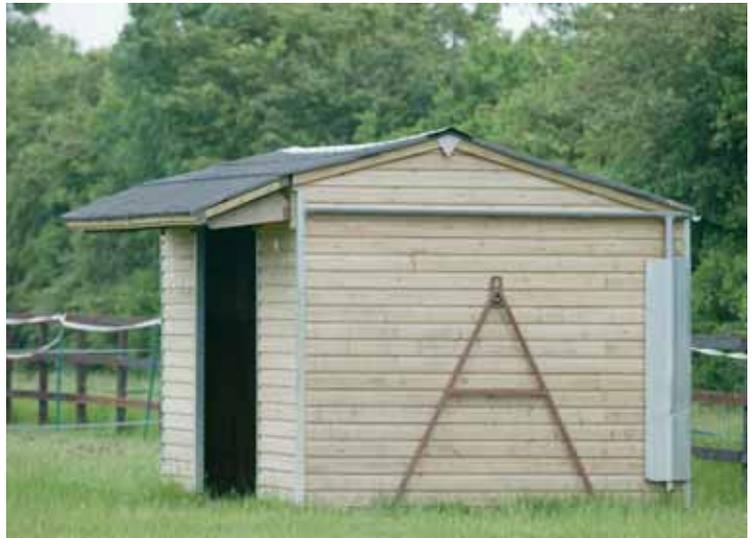
Fresh, clean water should be available at all times from containers free from sharp edges and which are easy to clean. Self-filling troughs are best. Make sure enough water is available for the number of horses in the field to access easily. Natural water



sources, such as streams and ponds, are not recommended as water provisions for horses. They are at risk of contamination, can be of varying quality and may be difficult for the horse to access safely.

Shelter

It is crucial to provide horses with protection from inclement weather conditions and strong sunlight. This shelter (whether natural or man-made) should be for both winter and summer use. Natural hedges and mature trees can provide some degree of shelter but these may be less effective during the winter months when no longer in leaf.



Man-made shelters can range from simple, open windbreaks to enclosed field shelters. Windbreaks can be placed within the fence line or provided as freestanding, cross-style constructions within the field. Enclosed shelters need to be large enough for the number of horses in the field, ideally with the addition of a fenced area of hard standing for more spacious and flexible accommodation. Consideration should be given to access widths and roof height for the types and sizes of horses to be housed.

Whichever type of shelter is used should be positioned to provide protection from prevailing winds and located in a well-drained area of the field. Shelters should be soundly constructed, free from projections that may cause injury and secured in the ground to reduce the risk of their moving, being pushed by horses or being blown over in strong winds.

Company

Horses are herd animals by nature, and prefer to live in social groups. It is important to make sure they have at least one compatible companion (ideally of a similar age, size and type) that is on a similar management regime. Equal consideration must be given to the care of an equine companion. Where only two horses are kept together, measures need to be taken to prevent a lone horse from becoming distressed (if their companion is taken out of the field to be ridden, for example).

Feeding

Grass is often overlooked when considering a horse's daily food ration but it is often the sole (or predominant) part of a horse's diet. Whether fresh (grazed pasture) or fed as conserved forage (hay or haylage), grass is an important energy, nutrient and fibre provider.

In the winter, and for horses in heavy work, hay and additional hard feed may need to be given, depending on how much grass is available. Vitamin and mineral supplements may also be required, to make up for the lower feed value of grass.

Feed should be allocated according to the size, type and workload of each horse. During the summer, and for horses in light work, a fibre-based diet of grass and hay is usually a good option.

Hay can be fed loose on the ground or in safely tied hay nets. Remember, however, to provide more piles or nets than horses in the field, to prevent them fighting. Hay racks can be used, but make sure that the one chosen is designed specifically for horses.

If the horse is overweight, is prone to or suffering from laminitis, or is under veterinary treatment, advice should be sought from the vet regarding appropriate management and feeding.



Rugs

Many horses (and particularly ponies) are fairly hardy and will be able to live outdoors without a rug all year round, provided that they have a good natural coat and access to shelter. Rugs provide useful additional protection to those horses that are not very hardy or to those that have been clipped. The age, type, condition and workload of an individual horse must be considered when deciding whether to rug-up, and also when selecting the right type of rug.

If the horse is being ridden regularly, it may be worth using a light weight waterproof rug to help keep the horse clean and dry and reduce the time spent grooming and drying the horse. Fine-coated horses may need a slightly thicker rug during very bad weather.

Rugs should be well-fitting with safe straps and buckles. Generally, several rugs are required – lighter weight for spring and autumn and thicker for winter. Spare rugs are also required, to allow a rug to be cleaned, dried and (if necessary) repaired.



Golden rules to ensure the wellbeing of horses on grass

In addition to providing a safe and well-maintained field environment, the keeper of a field-kept horse (and of a horse being turned out for part of the time) must ensure that the animal gets the right level of nutrition, exercise, care and supervision.

- It is important that the field is visited at least twice per day, to check the horse and inspect the field.
- Droppings should be removed from the field and shelters on a regular basis – at least once per week is recommended.
- Good pasture management is essential. It is important to rest some of the land, to enable it to recover and new grass to grow. Dividing the field or strip-grazing both work well.
- If the horse is not rugged, keep grooming to a minimum. This will allow grease in the coat to provide some natural protection.
- Where rugs are used, they should be removed daily, to ensure they do not slip back and cause sores or rubbing.
- Horses benefit from consistent human contact and handling. Spend time interacting with your horse so that the animal is always happy to be caught.
- Make sure that horses are microchipped. Consider their security by keeping all gates securely padlocked. Horses should not be turned out wearing a head collar, nor should head collars be left in a visible place.
- Make sure fresh, clean water is available at all times. Water troughs must be kept full, fresh, and free from ice in cold weather.
- Feet should be picked out and inspected daily, and seen every six to eight weeks by a qualified farrier.
- Where horses need to be on restricted grazing to manage their weight, stable toys can provide good interaction and keep them occupied. Alternate toys regularly, to maintain novelty and interest.
- Horses are herd animals and need compatible equine companionship.

Related Blue Cross publications

The following leaflets from the *All About Pets* series may be useful.

- *Yard safety and security (H3)*
- *Stabling and livery (H4)*
- *Worm control and pasture management (H6)*
- *Obesity: prevention and management (H15)*



All About Pets

The national pet care information service

All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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