



Euthanasia—It's about Quality of Life

We love to think about our wonderful times with our equine companions, but rarely do we spend time thinking about when that relationship will come to an end. End-of-life decisions represent our last and most-important obligation of ownership in our cycle of care for our horses. It can be one of the hardest decisions that we make as an owner. It is also one where there is very little training or help when it comes to making that final decision.

As a result, there are times when the owner is at a loss when there is a need to make a decision about euthanasia. The lack of support for making this decision, or the emotional ability to decide makes it a challenging situation.

Our major responsibility and goal as a horse owner is to ensure welfare of the horse throughout its life. This can be summarized in the Five Freedoms.

The five freedoms are described as:

- Freedom from hunger or thirst by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour
- Freedom from discomfort by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area
- Freedom from pain, injury or disease by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment
- Freedom to express (most) normal behaviour by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind
- Freedom from fear and distress by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering

When one or more of these factors has been compromised due to disease, injury, neglect, and if there is no way forward for a timely improvement, then we need to seriously think about the Quality of Life for the animal. The basic health and normal functioning of the horse needs to be assessed along with the affective state of the animal (negative states, fear, discomfort, pain, and distress). It is also important that the horse is able to carry out normal behaviour patterns, including being out with other horses, and in an area that is suited to the normal behaviour of horses. Your veterinarian can help you assess each of these topics carefully as well as the chances of the horse recovering and the costs.

When there is pain, imminent decline, ongoing repeated episodes (particularly when the episodes are of increasing severity/duration) without the availability of effective medical control or financial means to pay for this, then it is time to frankly discuss this with your veterinarian.



Many horse owners have said, "Oh, I could never do that!" But the important question now is "Can I continue to let my horse suffer?" We must always consider carefully the quality of life vs. merely prolonging life and allowing suffering to continue.

Remember, when it comes to end-of-life decisions, it is about the welfare of the horse first and foremost and "It's not about you!"

The new Canadian Code of Practice helps each of us as horse owners to make better decisions about health management for our horses, whether for the herd or for the single horse owner. These decisions then lead to management practices that will support health and reduce disease. Check out the [Welfare Code Decoder tool](#) from Equine Guelph to ensure that you are covering all the bases for the full circle of responsibility from initial purchase to end of life.

Learn more about the Equine Code of Practice – visit – [Euthanasia](#), and take Equine Guelph's short online course [Horse Care & Welfare](#).

More information on animal welfare:

- [Welfare Code Decoder Healthcare tool](#)
- [Final Goodbye - Equine Guelph infosheet](#)
- [Equine Guelph Full-Circle Responsibility Program](#)

