

# Horse Care Guide

Horses are living beings with needs, wants and feelings, just like you and I. They require time, money, love, understanding and commitment. Having horses in your life can be a wonderful experience and very rewarding, but only if you think through your decision very carefully before you adopt and ensure you and your family understand and accept all that will be required of you as a responsible, loving horse owner.

Horses are social animals, which means that without company or interaction, they get very bored, lonely and unhappy. When you get your horse, you should try to make sure that he/she will be kept relatively close to your home so that you can visit often and spend time with him/her. If your horse is kept very far away and you hardly ever visit, he/she could start to feel lonely and neglected. If you can't always be near your horse, make sure that he/she has other people around who are willing to check on and spend time with him/her in between your visits.

## Diet



All horses must have access to clean water and a well-balanced, nutritious diet. Horses are herbivores; this means they eat only grass and plants like cows, sheep and other farmed animals. However, the horse's digestive system is completely different to many other animals. Horses have a monogastric stomach (one large stomach) and a very large intestine. This specialised digestive system is what helps your horse be able to digest a large amount of grass and plants and gain nutrients from these to be fit and healthy. You should never feed anything to your horse that you haven't checked first. If you feed your horse something he/she shouldn't eat, your horse could get very sick.

The main part of your horse's diet should be pasture. This includes grass, clover, and other pasture plants. Horses love pasture and will feed on it often for 9 hours a day, sometimes more. If you have good quality pasture and lots of it, then your horse will only need a diet of pasture and a small amount of hay. If your horse is eating mainly pasture, the pasture must be of good quality. However, your horse should not have unlimited access to pasture - if your horse gets too fat or eats too much rich food, he/she can get sick.

You can also offer commercial food to your horse if necessary; this comes in the form of grains or pellets and is sometimes called 'supplemental feed' or 'hard feed'. However, this is only recommended if your horse is not eating enough pasture, is missing key nutrients or if there is another specific reason that your horse needs a high energy diet.

If you feed pasture, hay and a commercial grain food to your horse, he/she could easily end up overweight and get sick.

If you feed your horse supplemental feed, this food will need to be kept stored away in a dry, shaded space. If this food is kept outside, it should be wrapped up tightly and kept in a shed or some other safe place. This will stop the food from spoiling and keep it protected from any wild rats or mice that might be hungry! It is also very important that your horse's hay stays dry and doesn't become wet or dusty. Horses can get very sick if hay becomes wet and mouldy. Therefore, you will need to make sure your horse's hay bales are covered up properly and stored in a shed, or if they are left outside, they should be covered securely with a tarpaulin or another waterproof material.

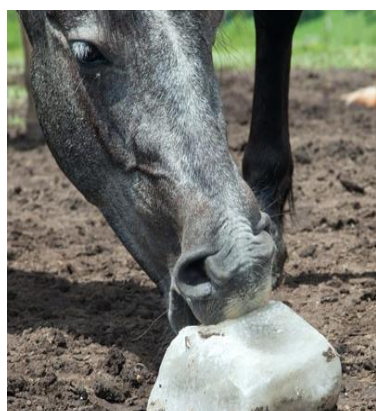
You should never feed your horse grass clippings from mowing your lawn. Grass clippings can be very dangerous to horses. Grass clippings are too small for horses to eat, meaning they will swallow them whole. Your horse needs to properly chew his/her food before swallowing it because of the horse's special stomach.



Saliva is made when you chew, and your horse's saliva does a special job of processing their food. If your horse swallows without chewing, the grass will not get digested properly and instead could make your horse very sick. Remember, horses can't vomit, so if your horse gets sick from eating grass clippings, he/she won't be able to vomit this backup. Instead, the grass clippings will give your horse a very sore stomach and could even cause serious damage and make your horse very sick.

Your horse will eat a lot of pasture, so your horse's pasture will need to be carefully looked after to make sure it is enough for your horse to eat. If your horse has finished eating all the pasture in one area, ideally you should have another area of pasture that your horse can graze on. This is called 'rotating your pasture'. Otherwise, you can get hay to give to your horse when the grass has run out.

You can help your pasture grow back faster by looking after it well. You will need to water the area and can also apply fertilisers to the ground. By doing this, you are making sure your horse always has a new fresh supply of healthy pasture to graze on. Remember though, if you run out of a good pasture and are waiting for it to grow back, you will need to feed more hay to your horse and may need to feed your horse supplemental feed.



Since horses eat mainly pasture and other roughage (hay or grain), they can need an extra source of some nutrients that they need to be healthy. Therefore, it is recommended that you allow your horse access to a mineral lick/block. These are special rock like, hard blocks which contain important ingredients in them such as salt, calcium, copper, iodine, selenium and zinc, which may be lacking in your horse's diet. These ingredients will help your horse stay healthy and fit. Your local farm store will be able to find you a mineral lick/block that is made especially for horses.

There are some plants that are poisonous to horses. These plants should never be fed to horses and your horse should not be allowed access to areas where these plants grow either.

If a horse were to eat one of these plants, he/she could become very ill and possibly even die. Some of the plants which are poisonous to horses include:

Nightshade	Buttercups
Milkweed	Cherries
Thistles	Peaches
Horseradish	Plums
Tall Fescue	Apricots
St Johns Wort	Ragwort
Juniper	Potatoes
Privets	Tomatoes
Avocado	Dandelion

Please note: this is not a complete list of all poisonous plants.

You will need to check to make sure that your horse's area has none of these plants present. If you suspect your horse may have eaten something poisonous, you should call a veterinarian right away.



Horses need a lot of water, especially when it is hot. Some adult horses will drink up to 50 litres a day! You'll need to make sure your horse can get to his/her water at all times, 24 hours a day. Horses don't like dirty water - if you give your horse dirty water he/she will become sick because horses cannot vomit, to bring the water back up and out, like us humans can. Therefore, you'll need to regularly make sure your horse's water is

clean and free of any contaminants like dirt or algae. You should use a strong, heavy trough or a concrete water tank for your horse so that he/she cannot knock over the water. Horses also do not like their water ice cold, so make sure the water is nice and cool for your horse without being too cold!

### **Suitable Environment**



Horses are big animals who will need lots of room. When housing your horse, you need to make sure he or she has enough room to get daily exercise. Also, your horse's sleeping and resting area need to be big enough for him/her to stand, stretch, turn around and lie down in. Horses should not be left tethered (tied up) in a confined space. A horse needs to be able to exercise and explore throughout the day in order to be



happy and healthy. Ideally, one horse will need about one acre of land. If you do not have land available to use or rent, then having a horse probably isn't right for you.



We all know New Zealand weather can be a bit crazy sometimes! Sometimes the sun is out, and it is really hot, while at other times it is very cold and even snowy! Horses notice the change in weather too, so your horse will need some form of shelter to protect him/her from the sun, wind or rain.

Although horses can cope with some changes in temperature, when the weather is both windy and rainy, this can make your horse very uncomfortable. If your horse becomes too hot or too cold, he/she can become quite ill and could even die. This is why it is very important to make sure your horse is well protected from the heat and cold.

Shelter for your horse should be appropriate so that he/she stays warm and dry when it is cold or wet, and so that it also provides the horse with shade so that he/she remains cool and comfortable even when the weather is hot and sunny. Shelter for your horse can consist of a combination of:

- Gullies or hollows in the land
- Trees, hedges, bushes
- Barns, stables or buildings
- Haystacks
- Horse rugs (which fit like a jacket and keep the horse warm and dry)

Horses are big animals that need somewhere soft and comfortable to rest. Bedding should be soft and absorbent so that your horse's rest area stays dry and clean. The suitable material to use for your horse's bedding include:

- Straw
- Shredded newspaper
- Small wood pellets
- Soft rubber mats specially designed for horses

These materials can be purchased from your local farm store.



Remember to clean your horse's rest area and bedding out regularly and keep it nice and fresh. Horses can poop a lot - up to 12 times a day! You'll need to make sure you're cleaning up after your horse regularly. Otherwise, your horse's home will become dirty and smelly very fast! Too much mess can attract flies and spread worms, both of which can bother your horse and make your horse sick.

Horses are very strong and curious animals so you will need a strong sturdy fence to keep them safely contained! You'll need to make sure there are no gaps between the fences where your horse can get out, or where his/her head or another body part stuck. If you do not already have a fence, you will need to construct one using either strong timber or a combination of timber and wire. If you do use wire in your horse's fence, be sure to check that there are no pieces of sharp wire sticking out anywhere on which your horse could get hurt. Never use barbed wire for fencing!

## Health Care



Your horse will need some regular preventative treatments to make sure he/she does not become ill. Vaccinations protect horses against diseases that can cause illness and death. There is a range of different vaccines available for horses; your veterinarian will be able to tell you what vaccines are recommended for your horse, based on the individual horse and his/her home and lifestyle.

Horses also need to be given medication regularly to protect them against worms, lice and other parasites such as mites. Your veterinarian will be able to provide the special medication for this and will show an adult how to give it to your horse.

## Hooves



Cleaning hooves is an important part of basic horse care. You should clean your horse's hooves daily, as well as before and after riding to avoid the hooves being bruised from rocks or debris that may get stuck in the hoof. Regularly cleaning and checking over your horse's hooves can also help you identify any problems early, such as odour, bruising, cracking, or loose shoes; if you do notice an issue with your horse's hooves, contact your horses

veterinarian or farrier to determine the proper steps to take to fix the problem before it becomes a whole lot worse.

Horses have four toes which are covered in hard hooves. Your horse's hooves will grow over time, much like your toenails, so you will need to keep them trimmed regularly so they don't overgrow! If horse's hooves are left to grow too long, they can cause major problems. Your horse will have difficulty and pain walking, and sometimes hoof problems can lead to very bad foot infections.

Your horse's hooves will need to be trimmed with special tools. It is best to let a farrier trim your horse's hooves. Farriers specialise in caring for hooves, especially those of horses. They are able to keep the hooves in good condition and check for any signs of hoof disease or other ill-health. They also watch for potential lameness issues, fixing issues before a

more serious problem occurs. A good tip is that if you begin having your horse's hooves trimmed when he/she is still young, this will make it easier for the horse to become used to.

Your horse's hooves also need to be inspected often to make sure they are healthy and in good shape. You need to check that your horse is not limping and that his/her hooves are not cracked or swollen, and check that they do not have any stones or other items stuck in their hooves. If your horse has hooves which are not taken care of, he/she can become lame; this a condition in which movement is painful, often making an animal walk unevenly or unwilling to walk.

Foot rot is a condition in which the hooves of your horse can get badly infected. This is caused by standing on ground which is too wet. To prevent this disease, your horse's living area should be kept dry and it is important to make sure that the land where your horse is kept is not too wet for your horse.

If your horse is on wet ground, do not leave him/her there for too long or problems will develop. Special horse shoes can be fitted to your horse's feet which help to protect his/her hooves. Ask your horse's farrier about providing your horse with horse shoes and see if he or he/she thinks it is necessary.

### *Teeth*



Horses have teeth that keep growing and growing! When your horse eats and chews his/her food, the teeth slowly become worn and ground down. However, this can happen unevenly, and cause problems or horses can even break teeth. Your horse's teeth should be checked regularly to make sure there are no problems that need to be addressed.

You should have a veterinarian, or a reputable veterinary dentist check your horse's teeth every 6 months or so. A veterinarian or a reputable veterinary dentist will be able to check if your horse's teeth are in good shape and can do any dental work that might need doing.

If your horse develops problems with his/her teeth, it can lead to your horse being in a lot of pain and getting sick as a result of not wanting to eat or drink. Look out for any of the following signs that your horse might have a dental problem:

- Behavioural changes
- Weight loss
- Loss of coat shine
- Chewing strangely
- Dropping food out of his/her mouth
- Bad breath
- Swelling of his/her face
- Not wanting to eat or drink

### *Colic*

Colic is a term used to describe when horses have pain in the abdomen. Colic can be caused by a range of things such as parasites, dirty hay or water, eating too much pasture, or changing food sources too fast.

Unfortunately, horses can experience colic quite commonly. Sometimes colic can be very mild, and other times it can be life threatening for your horse. It is best to see a veterinarian whenever you suspect your horse may be suffering from colic.

To reduce the risk of your horse getting colic you can:

- Make sure you always keep your horse's food and water fresh.
- Keep your horse up to date with medication to protect him/her against worms.
- Introduce new foods very slowly.
- Limit how much food your horse eats each day; don't let him or her eat too much.

Horses who have colic will act like they are in pain, making distressed noises and often kicking at their bellies. They often also want to lie down for long periods of time and are reluctant to get up. They may also roll and paw at the ground a lot. If you think your horse has colic, tell an adult and have them call a veterinarian immediately.

### *Grooming*

Grooming your horse will help increase the bond between you and your horse, and will also give you a chance to look over your horse for any signs of illness, injuries or pain.



Your horse's hair will grow long and thick, which means it is likely going to get dirty from time to time - because of this, your horse will need to be groomed regularly. With the help of an adult, you can do this by brushing your horse. Using special horse brushes, you start by brushing the side of your horse's body. Make sure to brush in the direction that the hair grows. This will comb out any mud and dust that might be on your horse's hair.

You can then brush the mane and tail also. If your horse's hair gets too long or he/she gets too hot, you can get special clippers that can be used to give your horse a haircut. This is called clipping your horse. Not all horses need to be clipped, but it is a good idea if you live in a hot area and your horse does a lot of exercises. Horses that keep their long thick coats in summer and do a lot of exercises are going to get very hot under a warm coat! Always get an adult to clip your horse.

Remember, when your horse first arrives at his/her new home he/she will probably be a bit scared and unsure and could act nervously. Horses are very strong animals and you could get injured very badly if your horse accidentally hurts you out of fear.



### *Signs your horse may be sick*

If you suspect your horse might be sick, the veterinarian should be called right away. Horses are normally alert, curious and quite social. A horse that is feeling ill can show the following signs:

- Not wanting to move or get up
- Appearing disinterested in people, other horses, food and what is going on around him/her
- Dull eyes
- Mucus in the eyes or nose
- Poor appetite
- Pawing at the ground
- Grinding teeth
- Kicking the belly
- Stretching the neck right out
- Diarrhoea
- Having a dry coat rough coat rather than a smooth shiny one



Male companion horses should generally be castrated so that there aren't more foals (baby horses) born, who might not be able to find loving homes. Castrating male horses can also help to manage their behaviour; sometimes stallions (male horses that have not been castrated) can be difficult to handle.

### **Behaviour**

One of the most important natural behaviours for a horse is being able to graze. Horses can spend up to 15 hours a day grazing, so it is obviously very important to them. If you decide to own horses, it is very important you allow them to graze. You will need to have enough space so that the horses are comfortable, do not feel confined and have enough pasture for them to graze on and keep busy. An adult will need to maintain the horse's pasture to make sure it stays healthy and of good quality.

Your horse is a herbivore and has a special digestive system. This means that your horse requires lots of pasture to graze on to stay healthy and fit. If your horse does not get the opportunity to graze, he/she can become depressed, ill and also develop problem behaviours. Remember, not being able to graze is not normal or natural for a horse.



Horses are naturally herded animals and are very social. This means it is normal for horses to want to be in herds (groups of horses). If you keep a horse alone, this means you are isolating your horse. Isolation isn't natural for horses and they should always be able to see and interact with at least one or two other horses.



Horses can become panicked or depressed when they are on their own, so it is very important that they have other horses for company.

In order to make sure your horse has the freedom to express natural behaviour, you should keep your horse with at least one other compatible horse (this means that they will get on well). This will help your horse feel safe and happy.

In the wild, horses stick together in herds (groups) and all look out for one another. Horses will take turns protecting one another, grooming one another, and playing with one another. A horse should not be forced to live on his/her own.



Although you and your horse might be best friends, this isn't really enough to take the place of a companion horse. Horses need a horse companion who they can do horse things with! They will feel safer in a group and will be able to socialise with other horses while you are busy and can't be with them. Horses that do not have another horse for a company will feel bored, lonely, and scared. If you keep a horse alone, you will notice

behaviours that indicate your horse is distressed and unhappy such as:

- Running up and down the fence line
- Lots of vocalisation (making lots of noise, for example, neighing)
- Weight loss
- Disinterested and depressed behaviour

When horses are together in groups or pairs, you will notice them interacting socially with the other horses. Some natural social behaviours for horses in groups or pairs include:

- Grooming – horses will groom one another using their front teeth and scratch one another's back. This helps them to reach places they can't scratch on their own.
- Fly Swatting – in hot weather, horses will stand nose to tail together in the shade. Then they swing their tails near the other horse's face, this way both horses keep the flies away from one another.
- Sharing body warmth – in cold or wet weather, horses will stand closely together and use each other's body heat to stay warm.

These behaviours are all very important for your horse and they will want the company of other horses so they can participate in these natural activities.



In some situations, a horse can bond with animals of other species. There have been stories of horses becoming best friends with chickens, goats and even cats! If you have other animals in the same paddock as your horse and they get on well, that is great and will provide some company for your horse. However; another compatible horse (one with which your horse

gets on well) is always the best companion. When horses are together, they can perform a wider range of natural behaviours together and feel safer than if they were alone or with another kind of animal.

Tethering means leaving a horse tied up to one spot for long hours at a time. Some people do this as a way to contain their horse. Horses should not be tethered as it doesn't allow your horse to express a range of its natural behaviours and can lead to your horse being frightened, being bored and sad, getting injured or falling ill.

- Tethered horses cannot explore pasture and graze for their own food.
- Tethered horses cannot go and try to find shelter if it gets too hot or too cold.
- Tethered horses do not get enough exercise since they are being forced to stay in one small area.
- Tethered horses cannot escape predators or anything that makes them feel frightened or threatened.
- Tethered horses cannot socialise with, play with, or groom other horses.
- Tethered horses can accidentally tangle themselves up to their rope and become badly injured or even killed!

Horses should only ever be tethered if there is an emergency. Instead of tethering, good quality fencing should be used. If you don't think you can provide a horse with a paddock in which he/she can roam freely, then you should really not get a horse.



You might be a bit surprised the first time you watch your horse drop to the ground and roll over on his/her back, but this is completely normal behaviour for horses and something they love doing! You might notice beforehand that your horse is pawing at the ground, walking in circles or bending his/her knees. Then, he/she will drop to the ground, and roll on his/her back and from side to side all through the dirt! Then he/she will often

get up and run around a bit. Horses roll for a number of reasons:

- To relieve itches on their skin
- To dry themselves off after they have gotten wet
- To cover them self in natural dirt after being brushed and groomed
- To rub the sweat off after having their riding gear taken off
- To show excitement when they get let out of their stable or barn
- For fun!

You might notice that when one of your horses starts to roll, the others will want to copy straight away. Often, horses will all use the same area to roll and the area chosen will stay the same.



Horses are naturally prey animals; this means that they are always on the lookout for potential predators and will usually run at the first sight of danger. Therefore, horses can be very alert and quite reactive, often taking their time getting used to new situations, environments, people and animals.

Horses that feel threatened or scared will attempt to run away, or if they feel trapped, they could even try kicking, stomping or biting. For this reason, you should be very careful when you approach your horse; always make sure your horse can see you coming and that you are not sneaking up on him/her.

Horses will also get startled by loud noises such as dogs barking or fireworks. You should try and protect your horses from noises that might scare him/her, by always making sure your horse has a safe place to shelter when he/she feels scared. With time, and in some cases training, you can help your horse overcome some of his/her initial fears. Being in a pair or group of horses will also help your horse feel less fearful.

Horses would naturally spend most of their day moving around looking for food. This means horses are used to being active and on the move. Therefore, you shouldn't keep your horse confined to very small spaces such as leaving the horse in stables all day or tethered in a small area. Horses need to exercise to be healthy and happy.



Horses need lots of exercise and freedom of movement. In the wild, horses travel many kilometres a day. For this reason, you need to make sure your horse has lots of space available in his/her field or paddock to explore and to run about in if he/she feels like it.

A horse that doesn't get much exercise is likely to become overweight, which will lead to him/her being unhealthy and unhappy! Lack of exercise can also lead to your horse developing behavioural problems. You can also give your horse extra exercise by riding him/her if your horse is OK with this and you choose to.

When you first get your horse, he/she might be a bit nervous around you, especially if the horse hasn't previously been trained to be used to people.

There will be times where you will need to handle your horse, such as if need to move your horse by putting him/her on a float, grooming, health check-ups or if you plan on riding him/her. Horses are nervous and flighty animals, so you will need to be calm and gentle with your horse and give him/her time to get used to you and the handling.

Approach your horse from where he/she can see you clearly and won't get a fright. There is lots of information on positive horse training and handling available on the internet through a well-respected and reputable organisation.

If you choose to ride your horse, you will need to start out very slowly to let your horse get used to the idea. You should also make sure you have all the right equipment and train your horse appropriately.

- You will need to train your horse to become used to being approached by you, being touched by you, being used to all necessary riding gear, learning different riding commands
- You will need to purchase or borrow a range of riding gear. For example: a saddle, stirrups, reins, halter, bridle, and bit. It is important that this gear fits your horse well so that you do not hurt him/her or cause discomfort.
- Your safety is very important too so you will need a good helmet and riding boots.



When training your horse, you should only use positive reward-based methods. Horses have been shown to learn well using reward-based training. You should never punish your horse for not doing something or learning something fast enough. Remember this is all new to your horse and it will take some time for it to learn what you want him/her to do. Your horse will learn to trust you. Always use a soft, gentle voice around your horse and never yell at him/her.