

Anaesthesia

Where possible in an equine patient, investigation and treatment is carried out under sedation or local anaesthesia, but general anaesthesia is necessary in order to carry out certain procedures painlessly, safely and effectively. Some short operations can be undertaken in a stable or field but many types of surgery require hospital or clinic facilities.



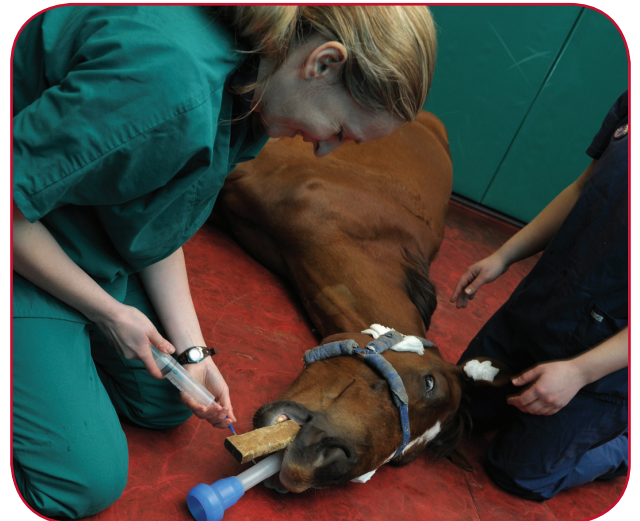
Preparations

For non-emergency procedures, withholding all feeding on the night before surgery is recommended in order that the horse has an empty stomach. The horse is weighed if possible so that drug dosages can be calculated accurately.

A clinical examination is carried out to ensure that the horse is fit to undergo surgery under general anaesthesia. This includes listening to the heart and lungs of the horse.

Shoes may need to be removed prior to surgery. Clipping of hair to allow placement of catheters and ECG pads is usually needed in a hospital situation.

A catheter is inserted into the jugular vein. This is used as an access point to provide intravenous drugs and fluids. Premedication with a tranquiliser or sedative helps to keep the horse calm and makes induction of general anaesthesia safer.



During anaesthesia

An injection is used to anaesthetise the horse, which is assisted to fall to the floor as gently as possible. In minor surgical procedures, 'top-ups' of drug may be given intravenously. In more lengthy operations, anaesthetic gas is used to keep the horse asleep. This involves putting an ET (endotracheal) tube into the horse's trachea (windpipe) via the nose or the mouth. Oxygen is also given via this tube.

If the procedure is being carried out in a hospital, the horse is usually moved by winch to a padded operating table where it can be positioned appropriately for surgery. The horse is monitored by a veterinary surgeon who will ensure that the depth and duration of anaesthesia is suitable for the operation to be performed. A range of monitoring equipment is now available which helps to keep the horse safe under anaesthesia.

After anaesthesia

In a hospital situation, a specially padded room will be available in which the horse can recover from anaesthesia. Some clinics also use a rope recovery system allowing the horse to be partially restrained during recovery. In 'the field' (i.e. in a non-clinic situation) the horse may be manually assisted to stand under the direction of the vet.

The horse will appear sedated after standing up, possibly for several hours. No food or water should be given until the horse has regained its normal demeanour, to reduce the risk of choke occurring.

Painkillers will be provided as required. Occasionally some coughing may be observed if an ET tube was used

Risks of anaesthesia



Huge advances in the understanding and provision of equine anaesthesia have been made in the past decade but, unfortunately, it remains significantly more dangerous to anaesthetise a horse, pony or donkey than a dog or cat. Recent studies suggest that equine anaesthesia carries a mortality risk of between 0.5 and 1% for previously healthy patients. Horses with colic or other medical problems have a much higher death rate under anaesthesia.

Problems which can be encountered include injury during induction or recovery, unexpected drug reactions, heart or breathing difficulties and muscle or nerve damage.

The vast majority of horses undergoing general anaesthesia do so very safely but risks can never be completely eliminated – always weigh up the potential benefit of the surgery with the small risk of an anaesthetic.



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