

### Equine castration

Castration, is the surgical removal of both of the testicles so that the animal cannot be used for breeding. It is also known as gelding, or 'being cut'.

#### Benefits

**No unwanted pregnancies.** If the stallion has been castrated, he is no longer fertile. He can therefore be turned out with mares and there is no risk of unwanted pregnancies. He also will not want to escape his field/stable to get to any mares that are in season.

**Behaviour change.** Many stallions can be aggressive, both to other horses and people. Stallions tend to 'mouth' and bite more than mares and geldings also. Once a stallion has been castrated, it can take up to 6 weeks for all the hormones to be completely out of his system, but most people notice a change sooner than that.

**Ability to graze with other horses.** Some stallions are able to be turned out with other stallions or geldings, but unfortunately, most of the time they have to be turned out by themselves as they are aggressive to other horses. This can be a very lonely life for them.

**No risk of testicular disease.** If the testicles are gone, your horse cannot develop testicular disease. Examples of this are testicular tumours or testicular torsion. Both of which can be very serious and painful.

**Easier to manage.** Many livery yards will not accept stallions, due to the risk of aggression and if there are mares present on the yard. This can make it very difficult sometimes, to find somewhere to keep your horse.

#### Risks of castration

**Reaction to sedation.** All animals can react differently to sedation and it is important to remember that horses can still react when sedated, so they could still kick if startled. The worst case scenario with sedation would be if the horse had a bad reaction and died as a result, however this is very uncommon.

**Haemorrhage.** Within the first couple of days there is the risk of haemorrhage. This is more likely to happen in mature animals and those that have covered mares before, as the blood vessels are more developed. Blood dripping slowly from the surgical site within the first few hours following the surgery is normal, but if it is a stream the veterinary practice needs calling immediately. The veterinary surgeon will try to identify the source of the excessive bleeding and stop it. In some cases, this is not possible and the horse may need referring to a specialist hospital for further investigation.

**Infection.** There is always the risk of the surgical site becoming infected following the surgery, despite our best efforts. Horses live outside and we cannot stop them lying down and contaminating the wound. The important thing is to keep an eye out for signs of infection (pus at the wound, malodour, the horse being unwell in himself) and if you suspect infection is present to call the veterinary practice and antibiotics will usually be dispensed. Scirrhus cord is infection that extends into the spermatic cord. This can persist for a long time and sometimes requires repeat surgery to remove the affected tissue.

**Swelling.** Nearly every horse will have some degree of swelling to the scrotum and prepuce following castration, and this will usually resolve within a few days. Some horses that feel very uncomfortable will need a short course of anti-inflammatory drugs to help take down the swelling and take away the discomfort.

**Evisceration.** Evisceration is where the abdominal organs emerge from the castration site. This is a very rare occurrence, but where it does happen, it is an emergency situation and the veterinary surgeon will need calling straight away.

**Persistent stallion-like behaviour.** This can often be a learned behaviour, especially if the horse was older at the time of castration. Sometimes, not all of the hormonal producing tissue is removed during the castration, and so can continue producing hormones and the horse still acts and feels like a stallion. The presence of hormonal producing tissue is identified via a blood test.

**Pregnancy.** Following castration, it can take 6 weeks for all the hormones and sperm to be out of the horse's system, so he should not be allowed with mares until after this point.

### Criteria

In order for castration to be able to be carried out on your horse, there are a number of criteria that need to be met.

**Both testicles need to have descended and be palpable in the scrotum.** The youngest horses are usually gelded at is 5 months old. If only 1 testicle is present, the horse is known as a 'Rig'. With time, the second testicle may descend, but both should be there by 1 year of age. If your horse truly only has 1 descended testicle, it is still recommended to have him castrated, but he would need to go into an equine hospital and have a full general anaesthetic and the second testicle will need to be located within the abdomen and removed.

Your horse needs to be **fit and well**. The castration will be carried out under standing sedation/general anaesthetic, and your horse needs to be healthy in order to minimise risks with this. Your horse will undergo a surgical procedure, so needs to be in good health to ensure good healing.

**Time of year.** It is best for castration to be carried out in spring/autumn, when there are not many flies about, but before it is too wet. This is to minimise the risk of infection.



**Tetanus cover.** It is recommended your horse is vaccinated against tetanus prior to castration, to reduce the risk of contracting this disease following surgery.

#### What is involved

When the veterinary surgeon arrives, they will first assess the horse's suitability to be castrated. This will include a full clinical examination and palpation of the testicles. If your horse is deemed suitable, he will first be given some sedation. This goes into his jugular vein via an injection and works very quickly. He will become very sleepy but should stay standing. The sedation usually lasts long enough for the procedure to be carried out, but on some occasions a 'top-up' may be required.

The testicles will be cleaned thoroughly using antiseptic solution. Local anaesthetic will then be injected into the testicles themselves, and under the skin of the scrotum.

The veterinary surgeon will clean the testicles again and then clean themselves.

An incision will be made over one of the testicles through the scrotum and the testicle pushed out through the skin. Special clamps, known as emasculators, will be clamped around the spermatic cord and blood vessels. This is usually held in place for 5 minutes and has a dual purpose of crushing the blood vessels to prevent bleeding, and cut the testicle off. Once the 5 minutes is complete, this will be repeated on the other testicle. Once both testicles are removed the surgeon will check for any excess tissue hanging out of the wound and trim away as required, and ensure there is no excessive bleeding. If this is all ok an antiseptic spray will be applied.

#### Post-operative care

**Exercise.** It is important following castration to allow your horse to walk freely. So, turn out into a paddock is good. Walking helps with drainage from the surgical site, and helps reduce swelling. If your horse has previously been in work, they should not be worked for at least 14 days after the surgery, until the surgical site is healed.

**Monitor surgical site.** The surgical site should be monitored for any evidence of infection, bleeding or tissue protruding from the wound. If any of these are seen the practice should be contacted.

**Feeding and water.** Your horse should be fed and watered the same as usual.

**Fly cover.** It can help to apply fly repellent to your horse to minimise the risk of infection spread from flies. It is very important fly repellent is not applied directly onto the surgical site though.

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