

Equine pre-purchase exam

When buying a horse, it is strongly recommended to have a pre-purchase exam, aka 'vetting', carried out by a veterinary surgeon beforehand. The aim of the exam is for the vet to assess the health of the horse and identify factors that might affect its suitability for the intended use, so the purchaser can make an informed decision whether or not to proceed with the purchase.

There are two types of pre-purchase exam, a 2-stage and a 5-stage. Wherever appropriate, a 5-stage exam give the most information and is recommended.

The person interested in buying the horse is the client for purposes of the pre-purchase exam. The veterinary surgeon who normally attends the horse for the vendor, should not be the vet who carries out the pre-purchase exam as there might be a conflict of interest.

Stage 1 – initial examination

The vet will carry out a thorough external examination of the horse, to detect any signs of disease, injury or abnormality. The incisor teeth will be assessed to give a guide on the age. The exam does not include examination of the sheath, a detailed mouth exam, height measurement or pregnancy diagnosis.

Stage 2 – walk and trot in-hand

The horse is walked and trotted in-hand, ideally on firm level ground. The horse is turned and backed up. Flexion tests may or may not be performed.

This stage is to identify any lameness or other abnormalities in gait and action.

Stage 3 – exercise

The horse is ridden and to increase its heart and breathing rate. This enables the horse to be assessed at faster work and with a rider on board for signs of lameness. Any abnormalities that may be identified with the increased heart and breathing rate may be identified.

Stage 4 – rest and re-exam

After the exercise phase, the horse is allowed to rest and the vet will monitor the breathing and heart for return to normality.



Stage 5 – second trot-up

The horse is trotted in-hand again to look for any signs of injury made evident by the exercise and rest phases. Flexion tests may or may not be carried out. Trotting on a hard circle is useful but not mandatory.

If a 5-stage pre-purchase exam is carried out, a blood sample may be taken and kept in storage for up to 6 months for possible future analysis for behaviour-modifying drugs, or pain killers, which could affect the horse at the time of the pre-purchase exam.

After the examination is complete, the vet will decide whether the horse is deemed 'fit for purpose' and a certificate completed.

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