

# **The Care and Use of Equines**

**Prepared by the Virginia Horse Council**

**November 1993**

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Forward

This publication has been developed by horse owners and horse care specialists and reviewed by the Virginia Horse Council which represents equine breed groups and organizations throughout the state. This document should not be used for regulatory purposes; nor is it offered as the ultimate management manual.

The word "horse" used throughout this publication refers to *all* equines. The horse is defined as farm or agriculturally based livestock kept for a variety of purposes including business, sport and recreation. This definition extends to all equines in the state.

Man and the Horse

The horse is an important animal to the economy, life-style and social and physical well being of thousands of residents of Virginia, including professionals, amateurs, young people, disabled persons and senior citizens. Numerous breeds of horses are kept for a variety of uses. The mutual and beneficial relationship between man and horse goes back thousands of years. The horse is valued for many reasons but especially for their natural athletic ability.

The wild horse was a herding, forage eating, non-ruminant herbivore, and was one of the first animals domesticated by man. Feral horses are kept in restricted and protected places and some descendants of wild ponies can be found in zoos and wildlife reserves. This document is not intended to address the management of horses in these situations.

Proper care and management are fundamental to successfully maintaining the horse, and horse owners should provide this care. Horses would not survive in any significant numbers on any other basis. There are a great many horse organizations, breed registries, saddle clubs, 4-H, Pony clubs, veterinarians, colleges, farriers and industry groups which are devoted to the welfare, safety of both the horse and the user, as well as to the health care needs of the horse, through education and research. Hundreds of publications are available to horse owners to improve the care, health, well being and safety of the horse. Most owners will provide much

more than the minimum to meet their desired criteria of a fit and healthy horse, There are traditional and cultural differences in the husbandry of horses which should be respected and understood. All horse owners have the responsibility for proper care and use of their horses and they must conform to the appropriate zoning, health and other regulations applicable to the area and state in which they reside. The following are basic care minimums that horses need.

### Needs of the Horse

The horse is a forage-eating, outdoor herd animal that loves to run and play. During periods of inclement weather, a horse given the choice between a man-made shelter and natural cover will choose an outdoor situation. A healthy horse can survive on its own given a few basic necessities such as fresh air, water, forage, space and salt. During periods of snow the natural winter fodder for a wild horse herd is dry standing grass in a field covered with snow, with the horses pawing through the snow for food and water. Such horses gain weight in the summer during lush periods, but will become thin during the leaner winter. Though not ideal, this is how horses naturally survive in the wild. However in most cases, man has taken to provide these needs for the domestic horse.

- Shelter – All horses need access to shelter from the sun and the elements. Trees provide shelter from the sun and may be preferred by horses to a man-made structure. Hedgerows can offer protection from a prevailing wind. In general, open, three-sided sheds more than meet the horses' needs for shelter.
- Water – All horses need access to all the water they desire. A fully grown horse needs to replace about 8 gallons of water lost each day by evaporation. In hot weather the horse may need considerably more than this amount, particularly if it is being exercised. Stalled horses should be watered at regular intervals throughout the day, so that water is available to horses all the time. Automatic drinking bowls can be a great convenience, but not all horses will use them. Rubber or plastic buckets are commonly used to water horses and should be kept clean and filled regularly. Such buckets are best suspended off the ground, so that it is neither soiled nor knocked over by the horse. For horses at pasture, natural flowing water from a river or creek is often the cleanest and best available source. If a pond is to be used as a source of water, fresh water should enter the pond either from a stream or spring. Stagnant ponds, which may have

been polluted by industrial or agricultural run-off should be fenced off and not used as a water source. Where natural running water is not available, horses will be watered from a water trough in their pasture. This should be inspected daily and cleared of any floating debris, and cleaned out on a regular basis. In the winter, it must be cleared of ice each morning. In the summer, any algae which might grow on the surface of the water should be removed, as they may be toxic to the horse. Occasionally, management or health reasons may require an owner to withhold water for relatively short periods of time.

- Air – Horses need fresh air. Good ventilation is easy to provide and is essential. Horses housed in box stalls should have 5 to 30 air changes per hour, depending on climatic conditions. Natural ventilation will usually provide this, but may need to be augmented in the hot summer months.

- Food – Horses are grazing animals and in their natural state spend most of their day grazing prairie grasses. This is because they have a small stomach relative to their size and they must eat constantly to consume the quantity of forage they need to keep their bowels in working order. Long stem fiber in the form of grass, hay, or in an emergency straw, is essential to the horse. A stalled horse should be provided with 1% of its body weight in hay a day; for example, a 1000 lbs. horse should be offered at least 10 lbs. of hay every day. Horses on good pasture do not need this amount of hay, as they can obtain their roughage from grass. Making some hay available to horses at pasture in the height of summer may be wise, and is essential during the winter months.

Most feeding programs are based on a forage program (hay or pasture). Grain and higher energy items may be added for higher level performance horses, including pregnant mares. Feed companies today also produce what are known as complete feeds, feeds which contain not only the concentrate part of the diet, but also the roughage needed by a horse. These are especially useful for horses which are traveling or older debilitated horses with digestive problems. Milking mares often lose weight and may require the extra nutrients a higher plane of nutrition can provide. The feeding of grains for energy is dependent on the amount of work the horse is expected to perform, its size and its temperament. Too much energy in the diet will cause the horse to become overweight, and may lead to laminitis (an inflammatory disease of the feet). Fat, fed in the form a

vegetable oil, is a useful adjunct to the older horse's diet. It provides energy during the cold winter months and is less likely to precipitate laminitis in susceptible horses than would a grain supplemented ration. Most feed stuffs provide adequate vitamins and minerals, but supplements may be used on expert advice.

When mares produce adequate milk, foals can be kept totally on the mother's milk for up to six months of age, however, most owners provide supplemental feed for foals. Foals will, in imitation, naturally begin to nibble at their mother's food, or at the grass in the pasture at about three weeks of age, and may be fed a creep feed from 2 months of age.

Growing horses also require more nutrition. The quantities of food provided will depend on the age, weight, condition and exercise requirements of the particular horse. For information concerning the type and quantity of feed to give to a horse at any particular stage of growth, it is best to refer to the National Research Council's Nutrient Requirements of Horses publication. (see bibliography)

Horses can be too thin, and they can also be obese. Fit athletes carry little body fat, so young animals in racing condition may look relatively thin, but the gloss of their coat is an indication of their physical well-being. Body condition alone is not a totally accurate guide to the condition of a horse. Age, sex, along with health or teeth problems must be considered in regard to body condition and feeding programs. Older horses may need individual care and an elevated plane of nutrition, especially during the winter months.

In summary, all horses should receive adequate and appropriate nutrition on a routine basis. Horses do not have to be housed and fed grain, even in winter, to be properly cared for at the maintenance level. Horses, once beyond the foal level, need a daily allowance of forage; from grazing in the summer (and in the winter if forage is available in the field) or from hay in the winter. The color of forage alone is not necessarily a sign of adequate quality.

- Exercise – In general, horses need a regular exercise program. This can be provided by the owner, or the animal can be allowed to run free in an area large enough for this purpose. The specific time and amount will depend on the physical condition of the animal, its age and climatic conditions. In general, a

horse can meet his own exercise needs if provided with a small paddock. Stabled horses need supervised exercise at least four to five days per week. Limited exercise, or even no exercise, might be indicated for animals recovering from disease or injury or other special conditions. Horses also have needs for rest, leisure, play and sleep.

- Fencing – Fencing should be in place to protect the horse, the owner and the public. There are many acceptable types of fencing. The most effective (and most expensive) is a post and board fence, but there are other ways in which a horse may be confined in a field. Post and wire fencing, where the top of the fence is outlined by a wooden rail, is less expensive, and safe if well maintained. Although used, wire fences are not ideal, as they are not visible to the horse. Some of the newer kinds of electric fence may be used, provided they are well flagged with colored tape. Gates should be strong, secure and tamper proof. Signs should be posted and the property protected against trespassing. Cattle guards are not recommended.

- Space – Specific space requirements are not, as such, a basic need. Horses may be kept in rural, urban, or suburban environments. Totally stabled horses are often kept in box stalls measuring 8' by 10' with adequate ceiling height and ventilation. Horses with access to a small paddock can make do with less space. Horses may even be housed in standing tie-stalls, measuring 9' by 4'; however such horses should have a regular, daily, out-of-stall exercise program. Horses may be kept in pastures or bare dirt paddocks. Obviously a miniature horse or Shetland pony will not require as much space as a large draught horse, even though the latter are often kept in tie-stalls.

- Farm Management - Other factors that should be considered are environmental concerns, such as noise, dust and litter. Insect and rodent control should part of the management program. Manure handling and disposal should be a daily routine. Feed, hay and farm equipment should be stored in a place inaccessible to the horse. Grain should be kept in a container (a plastic trash can will suffice). Preferably hay should be stored under cover. Horse equipment should be kept in the tack-room.

The property should be kept in repair and maintained for the safety of the horses, users and the public. The property should be inspected for fire safety at

least once a year and fire management procedures should be in place, along with information concerning security, fire and veterinary care.

- Routine - Horses are creatures of habit and like to be treated in a very routine way. Make sure that they follow the same routine at the same time each and every day. Post a schedule of events for each horse outside its stall so that should another person have to take over at short notice they will be able to follow the regular routine for that horse. This is very reassuring to the horse.

- Handling - Horses are flighty animals and should be approached with caution. Move slowly and deliberately when approaching a horse. Talk to the horse in a soft soothing voice. This lets the horse know exactly where you are. Avoid making sudden moves or loud noises around the horse. It is conventional to approach a horse from the horse's left (near) side. Horses are traditionally approached in this manner and will be less alarmed at a stranger approaching in a familiar way. Once you have caught the horse, place a halter on and keep close to the horse. Reassure the horse by talking to him all the time. Never wrap the lead rope round your hand or wrist to avoid personal injury. Take extra care on windy days as horses are more easily scared under these conditions. Stallions are not as easy to handle as are mares and geldings and can be dangerous to the inexperienced.

- Hoof Care - Horses may be kept shod or bare footed. Regular hoof care should be provided by the owner or a qualified farrier. If a farrier is employed to care for a group of horses, then he should be asked to trim the horse's feet at least every 6 to 8 weeks. Shoes should generally be replaced or reset every 4 to 6 weeks.

- Health Care - A disease prevention program should be implemented in conjunction with an equine veterinarian. This will vary from farm to farm and with the needs of the programs involved. Regular deworming, teeth inspection, and vaccination should be implemented, as recommended by a local equine veterinarian. Gelding, identification and other recommended procedures are also part of an appropriate management system.

- Need for Company - Horses appreciate the company of other horses or animals. Merely being able to look out a stall and see another horse should at least be considered. Horses also develop a social order which can only be

managed by separation or confinement. Stallions must not be run with other stallions, nor generally with geldings, and will need to be isolated for their own and the public's safety. Of course stallions may be running with a group of mares during the breeding season, but this is not common. A stallion at pasture with his band of mares should be approached with great caution as he will be very defensive of his harem.

- Training and Use – Horses are kept for varied and specific uses. Each use requires specific training and conditioning outlined by the rules, regulations and guidelines of the various associations, shows and competitive events.
- Transportation – Horses must always be safely and appropriately transported. Horses should be transported in trucks, vans or trailers that are specifically designed to carry horses. Such vehicles should be well ventilated, have sturdy floors and walls and an interior free from protrusions. The floor should provide good footing for the horses. When several horses are being transported, it is best if they are separated from each other.
- Grooming – Horses groom themselves naturally by rolling in the dirt. Most owners brush and clean their horses on a regular basis. When grooming a horse, all owners should look for signs of skin disease, parasite infestations, injuries, cuts and problems associated with improperly fitting equipment. Horses kept out all year do not need grooming; in fact, the accumulated grease, dirt and hair adds a protective layer to the horse's coat, helping to insulate it during the cold winter months.
- Waste Disposal – When horses are confined in small areas, the manure should be picked up regularly and disposed of in accordance with local regulations. Composting is one way to manage the disposal of manure on a horse farm.
- Salvage – Old or permanently disabled horses that may require euthanasia, should be euthanatized in a humane way. Carcass disposal may require burial, which must conform to local regulatory requirements. Sometimes horses are disposed of at the local livestock market. Specific laws regulate the transporting of horses to and from such markets, and veterinary inspections by the State Veterinarians office are routinely performed.

- Humans and Horses – Equestrian sports are carefully regulated, and these regulations stem from the concerns of the horse owners' themselves. Athletic performance, in horses as in humans, requires training, work, discipline, warm-ups, and cool-downs. Properly trained, a horse will be a willing participant in any athletic event. The ability of the horse to contribute and enjoy its work is what cements the relationship of man and horse, turning it into a partnership with a common goal.

Man's long relationship with horses has led to a great deal of respect for horses and their needs. The Bedouin who brought his mare into his tent is no different to the modern day Pony Club member who lives to ride their horse. The enthusiasm and willingness that a horse will give to any task which is asked of him, has earned the horse a special place in man's affection. Such trust from such a flighty animal does not come easily, and men and women have learned that in order to get the best from your horse, you have to give your best. Those who violate this trust are held in special contempt.

- Public concern - Many times the public seeing horses by the roadside are concerned when they appear not to have sufficient pasture. Dirt lots may not be uncommon where the amount of land available to the horses is small. Provided the horses are being fed supplemental hay and are in good physical condition there is little need for concern. Law enforcement officers and animal control officers, investigating allegations of inadequate equine husbandry, should initially seek advice from a local equine veterinarian or a prominent horse owner to ascertain the condition of these horses and determine if corrective actions are needed and advise on the management of the horses in question.

In the mind of the horseman, the welfare of the horse should come first and foremost. Most horse owners provide more than adequate care for their animals. The Virginia Horse Council commends this and encourages all owners to practice proper care and reasonable use of all equines.

### **Bibliography:**

Those wishing to obtain further information regarding the management and feeding of horses should consider reading the following publications:

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