

Ask A Vet: There Comes a Time

Sunday, May 3, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

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My gelding, Buddy, is almost 25 years old. He seems to be in good health, but I wonder how long he will be with us. When I think about the end of his life, I become very anxious. How will I know when it is his time to go?

Dear Reader,

I can sympathize with your anxieties. End of life decisions for all pets can be a difficult time. Buddy may end up making the decision for you by passing away in his sleep one night. But I think it is our responsibility as owners to be prepared. There may come a time when you will need to make the decision to humanely end your beloved animal's life and it may be the most compassionate thing you have ever done for him. Above all, the best interests of the horse should be given first consideration.

There are many situations in which euthanasia is a reasonable and responsible choice such as: incurable disease, chronic and painful lameness, inoperable colic, debilitation in geriatric horses, severe traumatic injury, and dangerous behavioral traits. Each situation is unique because it involves a horse and owner who are unique. Some horses are more pain tolerant than others or will respond to a certain treatment more readily due to behavior and personality. Each owner brings a unique perspective, financial considerations, and skills in treating horses to the table.

While euthanasia is an emotional issue, it is important to keep the practical considerations foremost in mind. Is the horse likely to recover or return to pasture soundness? Does the horse exhibit a desire to live or has it become severely depressed? Is the horse suffering needlessly? Can you provide for the horse financially? By stepping back and answering these questions first, a new perspective can be found in a previously emotionally paralyzing state of affairs.

Ultimately, it is your responsibility to make the decision. Your veterinarian can provide medical information, options for treatment, previous patients' experiences, comfort and support. He or she cannot make the decision for you. If you are having trouble deciding which way to go, and the circumstances are not urgent, get a second opinion. It may be worth it for your peace of mind.

Death is an inevitable end for all living creatures. Hopefully, Buddy will have a long and happy life with a peaceful passing. Thankfully we, as owners, have a solution to turn to when those animals under our care need our help to make that final transition.

-Dr. Wade Hammond