

Pre-Purchase Exam: Better Quality Assurance

Learn about how a pre-purchase exam can help determine if the horse you're interested in buying is sound and healthy.

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If you can't judge a book by its cover, you certainly can't rely on casual observation when it comes to buying a horse. Once you've narrowed the field and found a horse that is a good match for you, it's time to schedule a pre-purchase exam. It may be tempting to skip the exam if you are considering a fairly inexpensive horse, or think you already know the animal, but the fact is you can never go wrong with a thorough exam before buying the horse. If everything is fine, the exam is added assurance that you are making the right decision. Should the veterinarian uncover a problem or health issue, the pre-purchase exam can save you untold grief, frustration and money down the road.

Setting Up the Exam

A pre-purchase exam should be conducted by a licensed equine veterinarian who has no connection to the seller. If you don't have an equine veterinarian who you work with already, ask your horse friends to recommend someone they trust. You can also contact the American Association of Equine Practitioners (www.aaep.org) and inquire about veterinarians in your area.

The reason behind having a completely objective professional evaluate the horse is to discover any problems that aren't easily noticed, but that might affect the horse's performance or health. The exam should also reveal potential problem areas that might become issues down the road. Plus, the extensive handling of the horse during an exam gives you a good idea of his personality and demeanor.

Depending on the veterinarian, where you live, and how in-depth the exam, a pre-purchase exam typically averages \$250, with additional costs for X-rays, blood work and any other testing the vet may recommend.

Different veterinarians have different procedures for pre-purchase exams, and some can be much more involved than others. Ask up front exactly what is covered, what options (X-rays, blood work, et cetera) are offered and the cost involved.

We spoke with two equine veterinarians in different parts of the country to get the low-down on pre-purchase exams. Kevin Harbin, DVM, has a mobile equine practice near Ocala, Fla. Harold Putnam, DVM, practices in Burleson, Texas, where he owns Burleson Equine Hospital with two associate veterinarians. Between the two of them, Harbin and Putnam have 67 years of combined veterinary experience.

A pre-purchase exam always begins with a general health check-up, which should be a thorough hands-on process. Some X-rays (also known as radiographs) may be included, or may be recommended at additional cost if the initial exam alerts the vet to a possible condition he or she wants to further examine.

It is of utmost importance that the veterinarian knows what you plan to do with the horse. For example, a horse might not be suitable for jumping because of wear and tear on joints and bones, but fine for trail riding or showing in flat classes. Don't hesitate to ask questions of your vet and let him or her know your intentions for the horse.

First Things First

Using a stethoscope, the vet will check the horse's heart, listening for normal rhythm and rate, with no detectable murmur. He will also listen to the lungs to see if the horse has a chronic respiratory problem.

The horse's rectal temperature is taken, and most vets will also check capillary refill time (CRT) by pressing a thumb against the horse's gums, which should be pink on a normal, healthy horse. Thumb pressure will turn that spot of the gums white, but it should go back to pink again within one to two seconds, once pressure is released. A horse with an abnormal CRT may be ill.

The eyes are best examined in a darkened area, such as an unlit stall. "I want to see a clear eye with no spots on the cornea suggesting previous injury or infection," Harbin notes. "You should be able to see the iris and pupil completely. If there is a corneal opacity caused by abrasion, infection or an ulcer, this may not affect vision. If you can see most of the iris or pupil, that spot probably won't affect his vision."

Using the "menace test," the vet will step back and abruptly raise his hand or wave at the horse's head. The normal eye should immediately blink in response.

Putnam also stands behind the horse and moves from side to side to check the horse's peripheral vision. The horse's eyes should rotate as he watches the person. Standing behind the horse and making a noise is also a good way to check his hearing. Both ears should flick back when the vet claps his hands or makes another sound.

Your vet will check the horse's mouth and teeth condition. Teeth can also reveal the approximate age of the horse. A registered horse will have papers stating his exact date of birth, but if the horse is grade, or not registered, examining his teeth will narrow down his approximate age.

"Teeth should be level and incisors should meet directly on top and bottom," Putnam says. "You don't want to see an overbite (parrot mouth) or an underbite. There should be six uppers and six lowers on the sides and also on the front and bottom."

Horses require regular dental care because they chew in a circular motion, which creates long, sharp points on the edges of the teeth. If these edges are not smoothed off, or floated, as the routine is called, the rough edges can cut the inside of the horse's mouth, and even interfere with eating.

Conformation

A pre-purchase exam isn't a beauty contest, but your vet will be paying close attention to the horse's overall appearance and conformation (how the horse is put together).

The horse's conformation directly affects his performance. For example, some horses are built so that when standing square the points of the hocks are actually 2 to 3 inches behind the hindquarters, making it physically difficult for this animal to really get his hind legs underneath himself to work. A horse built this way would never be a good dressage, reining or cutting candidate, but could be fine for more casual pursuits.

Certain physical flaws can also contribute to unsoundness, depending on how the horse's use. "We put a lot of emphasis on general conformation," Putnam notes. "This says a lot about whether the horse will stay sound. The relationship of the body to the legs is also very important. Sometimes you see a 1,200-pound body sitting on a 900-pound set of legs, and we also see little dainty feet under a big body. You can't keep these kinds of horses sound."

If muscular development is not the same on both sides of a horse's body, this can indicate that he's not using both sides equally and that there may be muscle atrophy. Lack of symmetry can be the result of a past problem that has since healed, but it warrants investigating, Putnam says.

"A main thing is musculoskeletal soundness," Harbin adds. "You want the horse to be free from lameness or issues that can result in lameness."

Your vet will examine the horse both visually and manually over his entire body.

Working from the ground up, the veterinarian flexes and palpates each joint in all four legs up through the shoulder in the front legs and the stifle in the hind legs. If there is any swelling, heat, or abnormality, the vet will investigate the area closely.

To check for normal range of motion and to look for signs of trouble, the vet will flex each of the front leg joints for about 60 seconds and then release and immediately have a handler trot the horse off. Because of the larger joints in the hind legs, the vet will flex and hold the hock and stifle joints slightly longer before having the handler trot the horse off.

Arthritis and many lamenesses are accentuated by the flexion and range of motion tests. When the horse trots off, the vet is looking for stiffness and any signs of limping.

"Lameness is best detected at the trot," Putnam explains. "With front end lameness, the horse's head comes up (bobs) as the sore leg hits the ground. With a hind leg lameness, the horse will hike his hip up as the sore leg comes down."

Any lameness detected in the flexion tests is a reason to take X-rays. Most of the time, multiple views are taken of the same joint to better pinpoint the cause of lameness.

The vet also uses a large plier-like device known as a hoof tester to apply pressure on the sole, frog and heel of all four feet to check for tenderness.

At this point, the vet will likely ask to see the horse longed, worked in a round pen or ridden so that he can observe the walk, trot and canter in both directions. In addition to watching for normal gaits and any signs of lameness, this also provides a great opportunity to check the horse's recovery time and to see if he's out of shape.

After the horse has worked for 10 minutes, Putnam will again check heart respiration rates and see how long it takes for the horse to come back to normal resting rates. "You want them to come back to normal within 20 to 22 minutes," he notes.

Optional/Additional Exams

Depending on your vet, he or she may include or recommend additional procedures in the pre-purchase exam. Putnam routinely includes endoscopy in his exams, in which a scope is passed via the horse's nostril to check for normal function of the larynx. Abnormalities can create problems if the horse is going to be used for strenuous competition such as three-day eventing, endurance racing, et cetera.

Some vets will only take radiographs of joints if they suspect a problem, while others routinely shoot X-rays of both front feet, fetlock joints, hocks and stifles.

"If a horse is older and has a history of heavy competition, you may want to consider X-rays even if he passes the basic exam clean," Harbin says. "The front feet, front ankles and hocks are typically the places that are going to have the most wear and tear on a horse that has been shown or jumped."

Many vets now take digital X-rays. If this is the case and you buy the horse, request a CD copy of the radiographs to keep as a baseline for future reference. The vet should also provide you with a copy of any paperwork relating to the pre-purchase exam.

Additional options are to have a complete blood count, serum chemistry and Coggins test done. The vet will draw a small amount of blood from the horse to have these tests run. This gives you a very good background on the horse's organ function and enzyme levels, and becomes a valuable part of his health history. "We like to have a complete blood count and serum chemistry to compare later if the horse gets sick," Putnam says. "We recommend this to all our clients as part of our wellness program."

He suggests a Coggins test because he recently euthanized two horses that had equine infectious anemia, but both had one-month-old Coggins tests that were negative.

"I don't routinely do drug screening for a pre-purchase exam, but some purchasers do request this and it's not a bad idea. If you're going to spend a lot of money buying a horse and have any questions, this would be worth doing," Harbin says. He notes that a broad screen will cost around \$300 to \$500. Such screening detects pain killers, sedatives, anti-inflammatory drugs, steroids, et cetera, in the horse's system. You could also request a less extensive, and therefore less costly, screening if you simply wanted to check for the presence of commonly used anti-inflammatory drugs, such as bute or Banamine.

If you are looking at a mare and there is even the slightest chance you will consider breeding her in the future, ask your vet to ultrasound her reproductive tract just to be sure she is anatomically normal and complete, and that her ovaries show normal activity.

What Next?

Once the exam is complete and your vet has reviewed any radiographs and other tests, the final decision is up to you.

If the horse didn't pass the exam with flying colors, this may not rule him out, depending on your plans for him. For example, a jumper may show some signs of arthritis in his hocks, but has been treated in some fashion, either with anti-inflammatory medication or by injecting his hocks with steroids, hylauronic acid, or both. If he is performing well and you have his treatment history, the horse might be worth buying, but you know ahead of time that he requires extra maintenance.

"I always ask what the horse will be used for because you can overlook some things, depending on what the horse's job is going to be," Putnam says. "A horse might not make a dressage horse, but still make an excellent schooling horse."

On the other hand, a horse can have a clean pre-purchase exam and still not be the right one for you. In addition to physical health, it is extremely important that the horse is trained for your skill level and that you click with him.

If you have any doubts, ask the seller if he or she will agree to a trial period that allows you to temporarily ride and care for the horse as your own; in most cases, a deposit and an insurance policy on the horse would be required. Whatever the agreement, put everything in writing first.

Take your time shopping, request a thorough pre-purchase exam and don't be in a hurry to buy. You're making a major decision that involves a living being who will depend on you for as long as you own him. Once you find the right horse, all the effort will be worth it.

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