

## General Anaesthetic Information – Equine Hospital, Leahurst.

### What is general anaesthesia?

General anaesthesia is when drugs are given to an animal to induce a reversible state of unconsciousness. We also use drugs to provide pain relief and muscle relaxation. General anaesthesia may be required for routine procedures and/ or emergency surgery to be performed on your horse. The vets involved in your horse's care will inform you if they think that your horse will require a general anaesthetic as part of the treatment plan.

### What are the risks of general anaesthesia?

Horses undergoing anaesthesia are at greater risk of problems compared to other species like cats and dogs. This is mainly due to:

- Size - horses are heavy which means they are more prone to getting muscle damage after an anaesthetic. When they are placed on their side or back during a general anaesthetic, their lungs do not function as well as when they are standing, so they can develop low blood oxygen levels which can also cause problems. We use careful ventilation strategies to try to optimise breathing under anaesthetic.
- Recovery period - horses have to be left to recover (come round) from anaesthetic on their own in a specially designed padded room. Due to their size, it is not possible for someone to be in the room with them, but they are monitored and often sedated to calm them in this phase. Recovery complications can range from skin scrapes to catastrophic fractures of a limb. We choose the most suitable method to recover horses from anaesthesia and in suitable cases will assist them with a rope-recovery system. All horses are constantly monitored throughout this period.



These problems can in some cases lead to the death of a horse. Healthy horses undergoing planned procedures have been shown to have approximately 0.9% fatality (almost 1 in 100) in the period surrounding general anaesthesia. Sick horses, such as a horse requiring emergency colic surgery, are at greater risk of complications.

You should remember that the vast majority of horses undergoing general anaesthesia do so with no complications. In addition, here at the PLEH, we have a team of dedicated vets who specialise in anaesthesia and whose sole-focus is to take care of your horse throughout the anaesthetic period and to manage and minimise any anaesthetic risks to your horse. We perform hundreds of general anaesthetics every year and are unique in having dedicated equine anaesthetists to provide the optimal level of anaesthetic care.

If you have any concerns, or wish ask further questions, please get in touch with one of the anaesthesia vets via telephoning the hospital reception on 0151 794 6041.

### What should I expect if my horse needs an anaesthetic?

Your horse will be thoroughly examined by a vet in the anaesthesia team and weighed accurately. The examination will evaluate your horse's fitness to undergo an anaesthetic and any specific concerns will be discussed with you prior to surgery. You may need to contact your insurance company to inform them that your horse is due to undergo anaesthesia and surgery.

Shoes are often removed to minimise the chance of your horse injuring itself during recovery, and we ask that these are removed prior to planned surgery if possible. An intravenous catheter is placed, often into a neck vein, and this is used to administer drugs and intravenous fluids throughout the anaesthetic period. Most horses will have 2 close



clip patches on their necks and head to allow placements of catheters for treatment and monitoring.

An intravenous injection is used to anaesthetise the horse and they are guided to the floor when they lie down. The room in which we anaesthetise horses has padded walls and a padded floor to minimise the risk to your horse. A tube is placed through the mouth into the horse's windpipe which delivers anaesthetic gas and oxygen. The horse is winched onto the operating table and positioned appropriately for surgery. The horse is monitored constantly by a range of equipment, similar to that used to monitor people during anaesthesia, and by our dedicated veterinary anaesthetists.

When the surgery is finished, the horse is moved to a padded recovery box where they will come round from the anaesthetic. They are closely monitored throughout this period. Some horses are assisted with a "rope recovery system" where ropes are attached to a head collar and to their tail to help steady them when they get up on their feet. The horse is then left for a short period until they are steady before being taken back to their stable. We recommend that if you wish to visit your horse after surgery you wait until the following day as they are still quite sedated immediately following an anaesthetic. Painkillers are provided during and after the surgery.

If you have any queries please ask to speak to one of our dedicated anaesthetists.

### **Veterinary students and your horse**

The PLEH is a teaching hospital which means we often have veterinary students, on their final year rotations, who will be present and assisting during your horse's surgery. Students may carry out supervised tasks in suitable horses, such as placing an intravenous cannula, but this is always and only done under direct supervision by a qualified vet. They are also involved in monitoring anaesthetics whilst shadowing an experienced veterinary anaesthetist. This experience is invaluable for students is required for them to complete their clinical teaching.

