



# Handle with care

## Ponies and horses

**Species:** Horse

**Scientific names:** *Equus caballus*

### Description

There are many different types of ponies and horses. Riding ponies in Britain are nearly all descended from the nine native breeds that evolved in the mountains and moorlands of the British Isles. These include: New Forest, Dartmoor, Exmoor, Welsh, Fell, Dales, Highland, Shetland and Connemara. They come in a range of sizes and colours with the Shetland being the smallest – usually less than 10.2 hands. Others range between 12 and 14.2 hands.

Horses are larger than ponies and are generally divided into different types which include: cobs, thoroughbreds, hunters and hacks. Specific breeds are entered in an official stud book. But whatever the type or breed, horses and ponies are all sensitive animals with strong senses of smell, hearing, touch, taste and sight. The normal life span of a horse or pony is about 20 years, but many live longer.

### Life in the wild

Ponies and horses are herd animals and live where there is good grazing land – they feed during the day and at night. Horses and ponies need to graze for about 16 hours a day if they are to live purely from grass. Animals in the wild naturally put on weight during the spring and summer, and tend to lose weight during the winter. In the wild they rely on speed to escape predators and their feet are specially adapted to move at speed on hard ground like steppe and prairie land. The herd is an extended family and horses form strong bonds with each other. It is also common to have struggles for dominance within a herd.

### Source of animals

Horses and ponies can be bought directly from owners and from breeders. A veterinary surgeon that specialises in equine work may be able to advise on a reputable source. Before buying any horse or pony, however, it is advisable that it be checked out thoroughly by a vet. The pre-purchase examination is specifically designed to uncover not only current problems but also those that may appear in the future.

### Prior knowledge and preparation

Before buying horses or ponies, it is crucial that any potential keeper finds out all about their needs. Only then can an informed decision be made about whether the right care, facilities, time, financial means and long-term commitment can be provided. Accommodation, food and the necessary accessories, should all be in place before taking a horse or pony home. A potential owner should also talk to other horse and pony owners for further advice and also to a veterinary surgeon that specialises in this area.

### Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Horses and ponies will need regular veterinary care and vaccinations against diseases like equine flu, tetanus and equine viral arteritis. Regular worming and dental examinations are required and visits from a farrier every six to eight weeks. They will also need to be microchipped in case they are lost or stolen.

Males should be castrated, usually before they are two years old. A veterinary surgeon can advise on costs of consultations and provide information regarding care and treatment. Insurance will help with unforeseen veterinary bills.

Accommodation, riding and grooming equipment and feed can be expensive to provide and holiday cover can be difficult and costly to arrange. It can involve putting the horse or pony into livery or finding another reliable pony owner who will look after your animal while you are away. Your animal will need to be looked after every day by someone who understands its complex needs.

#### Health issues to find out about

- *Equine flu.*
- *Broken wind.*
- *Colic.*
- *Laminitis.*
- *Ringworm.*
- *Overgrown teeth.*
- *Tetanus.*
- *Worms.*
- *Respiratory infections.*
- *Saddle sores.*

## **Unhealthy/healthy animal signs**

A healthy horse or pony will have bright eyes with no discharge. Its coat should be smooth and shiny with supple skin underneath. Ears should be alert and follow you around and the mouth and nostrils should be free from discharge and damage. A healthy horse or pony should not be coughing and its breathing should be barely noticeable at rest.

A horse's tail should be shiny and active and should not be clamped between the legs and dirty with loose faeces. The hooves should not have any horizontal grooves or vertical cracks and the horn must not be broken or split where it meets the ground. A healthy pony is neither too thin nor too fat. An owner should be able to see where the ribs end, but not the shape of individual ribs.

## **Why are ponies vulnerable?**

Horses and ponies are completely dependent on their owners to provide veterinary care, correct accommodation and food. Many owners are not prepared for the cost of keeping ponies – veterinary and farriery bills can be very expensive. Horses and ponies are also time consuming as they need to be exercised, groomed, their feet checked before and after exercise, and their stables mucked out every day. The cost of accommodation, fencing and maintaining a pasture is also expensive and inexperienced owners often find out they have taken on too much. Some owners try to breed their horses and ponies without having the facilities or expertise to care for a foal.

## **Handling/transporting the animal home**

Ponies are sensitive animals and are easily frightened or upset. Approach their heads slowly and cautiously, speaking as you do so. Sudden noises or unexpected movements can cause alarm and make the pony difficult to handle. Anyone thinking of keeping a pony or horse should gain plenty of experience handling other horses and ponies beforehand. If ponies and horses are to be transported it should be in a purpose designed trailer or horsebox driven by someone with knowledge of transporting horses.

## **Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment**

Because ponies and horses are herd animals they may get upset if they are kept alone. They need the company of other horses, ponies, donkeys, goats or cattle. Human company is important too. Each animal will need at least one hectare of pasture with strong and safe fencing. This must be well managed and ideally divided in two so that one area of grass can be rested while the other is used. Poisonous plants like ragwort should be removed from the pasture. The field should have a shelter to protect them from cold, wet or windy weather. The shelter should be built facing south on well-drained land, preferably on hard standing and needs a wide entrance and a weatherproof roof. It must be large enough to hold all the ponies kept in the field.

Ponies and horses can also be stabled which means kept in a stable and let out to a field during the day. A stabled pony needs a basic stable routine for feeding, grooming, exercise and general care. It must be mucked out every day and droppings removed in addition to this.

All ponies and horses whether stabled or kept in a field need a constant supply of water. Their diet should consist of regular and prolonged access to good grazing, supplemented where necessary with good quality hay, oats, pony cubes, or other prepared feeds. Apples and carrots can be given as treats.

**THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.**

**If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.**