

PREPURCHASE EXAMS—Why should I get one?

Most people wouldn't buy a used car without first having a knowledgeable person take a look under the hood. So, why should buying a horse be any different? Of course, there are many obvious differences between horses and cars, but the principle is the same: know what you are buying. It can be devastating when a horse is purchased with high hopes of a long pleasure or performance career, only to find a potentially debilitating problem after the purchase has been made. The horse may be laid up for a period of time, or may be completely incapable of performing at its intended level. Whether the price you're paying for your horse is comparable to a used Pinto or a new Ferrari, it's a significant emotional and financial investment. You should be aware of any current problems, as well as factors that increase the risk of future problems, and the best way to detect them is to have a thorough prepurchase examination performed by a veterinarian.

To oversimplify it a bit, the prepurchase examination is essentially an extremely thorough physical examination. The horse's conformation is evaluated, because there are conformational faults that can predispose horses to problems such as splints, arthritis, navicular disease, or other conditions. Examination of the body systems (respiratory, gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, reproductive, etc.) is performed. The limbs are carefully palpated for joint or tendon sheath effusion (increased fluid), pain, imbalance, swelling, or heat. The hooves are evaluated for balance/symmetry, pain (using a hoof tester), angle, and shoeing.

The horse is examined in motion, and flexion tests are performed. The flexion tests are basically "stress tests" of areas of the legs; the leg is held in a certain position for a period of time, placing stress on the joints, bones, and tendons/ligaments of the flexed portion of the leg. When the horse is trotted away after flexion, the degree of lameness is evaluated. A "sound" horse (with a "negative" flexion result) may take a few stiff or awkward steps, but then moves normally. Positive flexion results vary from a mild lameness that persists for more than the amount of steps considered normal, to a leg-carrying, obviously painful horse. The distance and severity of the lameness after the flexion are considered when evaluating the response to flexion. Imagine keeping your knee bent and held in that position for a minute or two, then walk across the room. If you have a normal knee, it's easy. The first one or two steps may be a little stiff, then you're fine. If you have arthritis in your knee, you'll limp all the way across the room. Although the flexion tests do not specifically detect arthritis, it is one of the conditions that will be made more obvious after a flexion test.

Examination on a lunge line is frequently performed, and evaluation under tack with a rider may also be a part of the examination. The walk, trot (or jog), and canter (or lope) are most commonly evaluated, but examination of gaited horses may involve additional gaits. Several different ground surfaces may be incorporated into the exam to evaluate the gaits over hard and soft ground. Some problems are more obvious on harder ground, whereas other problems are more noticeable on softer ground.

Often, radiographs (x-rays) of the legs are taken. Any suspicious areas are evaluated, and radiographs of certain joints or areas (hocks, feet, fetlocks, etc.) may be taken to evaluate high-risk areas and determine baseline appearances for future comparison. The findings of the radiographs must be interpreted with consideration of the physical exam findings; the same lesion seen on the x-rays may not be significant in one horse, but may be of greater concern in another based on the exam findings or other factors.

Other procedures that may be performed include, but are not limited to: upper airway endoscopy (to evaluate the upper respiratory tract); ultrasonography (to evaluate tendons and ligaments); breeding soundness examination (for mares intended for breeding); fertility evaluation (for stallions intended for breeding); complete blood counts and/or serum chemistries (blood work); and drug testing. One or more of these procedures may be recommended or performed based on the examination findings, history, or the intended use of the horse.

Unlike cars, horses don't usually come with a warranty. The prepurchase examination may detect a problem that makes you change your mind about purchasing the horse, gives you some "negotiating power" in regard to the sale price, or doesn't affect the decision at all. Some horses "ace" the examination, with no lameness or problems detected. It is important to remember that the horse really doesn't "pass" or "fail" the prepurchase examination; the veterinarian is only trying to make you aware of the horse's current health and soundness, and it is up to you to make the decision whether or not to purchase the horse. It is also critical to understand that the examination is no guarantee of continued soundness or future usefulness. Because they are living creatures, there are too many factors beyond human control that can rapidly change.

Now that you're considering abandoning the horse purchase for a "predictable" car, consider this: when you enter the garage in the morning, does your car whinny and nuzzle you for carrots? Two hundred horsepower pales in comparison to the power a horse will have over your heart.