

What happens to your horse during a general anaesthetic, what to expect after surgery and aftercare required.

Surgery

General Anaesthesia (GA) may be required during both elective and emergency surgery, however the protocol will always generally stay the same. GA's are ideally performed in a hospital where your horse can be closely monitored in a sterile and safe environment. However for some short, elective procedures, GA's can be performed in the field or stable.

There are lots of different techniques and drug protocols which can be used to induce anaesthesia but the resulting effect is usually the same. The drugs cause the elimination of sensation by the controlled reversible suppression of the nervous function.

Usually before GA the horse's vital clinical signs will be taken and recorded. Some of these would be heart rate, respiratory rate, mucus membrane colour, temperature and weight. A square of hair will be clipped over the jugular vein which will be thoroughly cleaned before an intravenous catheter is placed. The horse at this point is usually given it's first pre-medication which will allow the induction agents to work more effectively when the horse is anaesthetised.

The horse is left in a quiet environment for 20-30 minutes while final preparations for surgery are made. After 20 – 30 minutes the horse is led to a knock down box. This usually is a padded room adjacent to the theatre. More drugs are given which will sedate the horse even further before the induction agent is given. The anaesthetist will usually administer these drugs and stay with the horse until recumbency has occurred. The horse will now usually be intubated which involves passing a rigid tube through the horses mouth into its trachea. This allows the horse's airway to be kept open and anaesthetic gases to be passed.

When the horse is fully anaesthetised hobbles will be attached to the horses' feet which allows the horse to be winched onto the table in the operating room.

Once on the operating table the horse continues to be closely monitored while anaesthetic gas is administered through a breathing system. Intravenous fluids will be given through the catheter already placed and blood pressure monitored through a separate intra-arterial catheter.

Most general anaesthesia will go very smoothly, however each animal is different, constant vigilance is needed to assess the plain of anaesthesia the horse is in. If the horse is not given enough anaesthetic it will move during surgery as it will feel the procedure, but if too much is given the horses higher brain functions will cease to work, i.e. it will stop breathing by itself.

Following surgery

The horse is winched back into the padded knock down box where it is continued to be monitored until it is nearly ready to come round. At this point the tracheal tube is



removed as the horse is capable of breathing by itself – and a swift exit is made! The doors are locked and the horse left quietly in the dark to hopefully recover peacefully. Some clinics now help the horses to stand by attaching ropes to the head and tail. These are then tightened using pulleys to assist the horse to stand whilst they are still slightly uncertain on their feet.

What to expect



A general anaesthetic is a major procedure for your horse, and owners should expect their horse to be profoundly sedated. Many hospitals will strongly advise that you do not visit your horse for 24 hours following surgery as this can be upsetting for both horse and owner.

Each case is different and the aftercare and the amount of time the horse must stay in the hospital will obviously vary depending on the procedure that was performed. The aftercare required at home will also vary but it is vital that you stick to the advice given as cutting corners can be very serious and may even prove fatal.

Box rest and aftercare

Box rest is usually required post surgery irrespective of the procedure. This should be adhered to as exercise or turn out too soon can be detrimental to your horse's recovery. Bed your horse on a nice deep bed with plenty to keep them amused in the stable. Toys such as licks and balls are widely available from tack shops and feed merchants and can help keep your horse entertained through out the day. Balls that have food inside which encourage the horse to forage are a great way to keep your horse calm and entertained – although these are not recommended after colic surgery. Mirrors are also another way of stimulating your horse and are often a good at calming an anxious horse not used to staying in alone.

Horses on box rest can be more prone to impaction colics as the motility of their intestines can be reduced and the moisture usually gained from grass is removed. If possible feed your horse little and often – giving him a smaller net every few hours rather than one big one in the morning and then again at night. Ensure that horses on box rest receive reduced quantities of hard feed and enough fluid to help prevent impactions. This can be introduced as simply as soaking hay – or adding more water to feed.



Haylage nets with smaller holes encourage the horse to eat slower, making the hay last longer than traditional large holed hay nets and tying two or three nets up around the stable can help keep your horse amused. If your horse enjoys his food and is becoming a little 'heavier' due to box rest, try soaking the hay for 12 hours or more. By soaking the hay overnight it takes away a lot of the nutrients, meaning that your horse is still eating but not getting the nutritional content of unsoaked hay.

Pay extra attention to your horses feet to avoid thrush. Pick your horses feet out twice daily and wash them once a day with a disinfectant. If your horse gets thrush then the dead tissue may need to be paired back and a medicated spray should be applied daily.

Ask your vet if your horse is allowed to be walked in-hand and if so for how long. Walk the horse for the advised time – some horses may need to be led out in a bridle and lunge line, or even a chifney bit if they have been stabled for a long time. It is worth taking the necessary precautions to avoid additional injuries. A horse that is leaping around when been led out may be doing himself more damage than good – speak to us and we may advise mild sedation, such as ACP. Your horse may appreciate a nibble of grass if he is allowed and it is safe to do so.

Don't forget to groom your horse, not only will it keep him looking better but will also allow you to check your horse thoroughly to note any changes and add something extra to his daily routine.

If you have any worries or concerns, no matter how big or small always call for advice.