

The Pre-purchase Exam

Buying a horse is a huge investment and should never be taken lightly. The purchase price of the horse may be small, but taking care of the horse is much more expensive than a house pet. Before you spend any money, it is very important to have a pre-purchase exam performed by an experienced veterinarian. There are a few things to consider about this valuable evaluation before you make the appointment: why you are buying the horse, who is best to perform the exam, and what to do with the results.

A pre-purchase exam can range from \$100 to a few thousand dollars. If you're looking for a pasture pet or companion, a basic evaluation may be sufficient. This basic evaluation will determine the general health of the horse. It is important to at least have this so you don't spend a few hundred dollars on a horse that requires thousands of dollars in care. The veterinarian will do a physical exam to see if there is any evidence of underlying disease that may be a future problem.

If you're looking for a horse to ride, further investigation is necessary. The veterinarian will look at the horse's conformation to see if the way he's built could possibly lead to a performance issue. A lameness evaluation with flexions is a tool used to determine the soundness of the horse on the day of the exam. The horse will be asked to move on all 3 gaits on a straight line and in a circle. After this baseline, a flexion test is performed on all 4 limbs. This will put stress on a joint and exacerbate a lameness that may not be apparent on regular exam. If the veterinarian finds a problem, an x-ray is recommended. A lot of horses flex positive, but have minimal radiographic changes that may need minimal treatment to maintain soundness. Other horses will have severe changes that may prevent them from being able to be ridden at all. For high performance and expensive horses, many buyers will have all of the major joints x-rayed to assure there are no red flags. If you are buying a performance or a trail horse, you need to know if it will be able to do its job.

The person that performs the pre-purchase should be an equine veterinarian. Make sure the seller is not a client of the veterinarian you choose. If the veterinarian knows the client or horse, it can bias the evaluation. You want to use a doctor that is seeing the horse for the first time to get the most useful exam.

The results of the pre-purchase will give you the information needed to assist in making a decision on buying the horse. The veterinarian will tell you if there are existing problems and if they can typically be managed. It is impossible to predict the future soundness of a horse, but the pre-purchase can help identify current problems. Some mild arthritic changes in the hock may never cause lameness, but ringbone or an old knee chip will limit the horse's performance capabilities. Make sure that you have ridden the horse several times before the pre-purchase so you know if he can perform up to your standards. A 2 week to 30 day trial is an excellent way to test the horse's abilities. Take the results of the pre-purchase exam and the trial period to make the best decision.

No matter how much money you are spending on a horse, it is invaluable to have a thorough veterinary evaluation. The veterinarian can't make any future guarantees, but will give you the information to help make an educated decision on the horse.