



Equine Pre-Purchase Exams

Dr. A Rachel Roemer
New England Equine Medical & Surgical Center
15 Members Way, Dover, NH

You have been actively looking for the right horse for months and have finally found one that is a perfect fit. Or maybe you see your dream horse standing in a field as you drive past and the owner is willing to sell! Or maybe you've been leasing a horse for months and decide you'd really like to own. No matter the circumstances, before you commit to acquiring a new horse you want to know if it has any medical conditions that might become issues in the future. Now it's time to call a veterinarian and schedule a pre-purchase exam. You worry about what the vet might find and you wait with bated breath for the final verdict.

Many horse owners can relate to this experience and have plenty of positive experiences as well as disappointing stories about pre-purchase exams. Looking for the right horse can be a prolonged, stressful, and emotionally charged process and by the time you get to a pre-purchase exam you don't want the vet to find anything wrong. However, it's important to take some time to think about what you can and cannot expect to get out of a pre-purchase exam and how that information can help you with your purchasing decision.

Pre-Purchase Exam Goals

The pre-purchase exam should be thought of as an information-gathering endeavor to help you, the prospective buyer, identify and understand potential issues. It should not be thought of as a simple "pass" or "fail" exam. Any findings on the pre-purchase exam need to be interpreted in the context of the horse's age, breed, discipline, history, and goals for future performance. For example, most experienced horses that have shown for years will have some "wear and tear" such as mild arthritis or other issues. The goal of the pre-purchase exam is to determine if those changes are normal for a horse of that age and experience and whether the condition will be manageable in the future. Prospective buyers should also understand that the pre-purchase exam is a "snapshot" of the horse at one moment in time. It does not guarantee the health of the horse one day, week or year down the road, but it gives you an educated picture of the horse's health and what reasonable expectations you can have for the future.

Communication is Key

As you can imagine, pre-purchase exams can be very tedious and confusing depending on the situation. It is important to keep an open mind during the exam and feel comfortable communicating with your veterinarian to make the process as beneficial as possible. You need to be able to clearly explain your expectations for the exam and what you want the horse to be able to do for you in the future. Similarly, your veterinarian needs to be able to help you understand the significance of any abnormal findings. If you are not going to be present for the exam, it is helpful to communicate with the veterinarian ahead of time and make yourself available by phone during the exam. You may also want your trainer involved in the purchasing decision. In that case talk to him or her about whether they would like to be present for the exam or available to talk to you and your veterinarian.

Pre-Exam Preparation

Doing some legwork before the day of the pre-purchase exam will help expedite the process and focus on the issues that are most important to you. Collect as much information about the horse from its current owner as possible, including current vaccination and deworming status, recent dental floating and shoeing/trimming, and ask about any significant medical history. Take some time to think about what realistic expectations you have for you and your future horse. It may help to write down specific goals, wants and needs and prioritize them. For instance, you may have a very busy work schedule and sometimes don't have time to ride for several days in a row. You'd really like a horse that can jump a 3'6" course, but you also want a horse that you can hop on after five days of sitting in a paddock and have a relaxing ride without feeling like you are going to get bucked off! If you found a horse that makes you feel safe in the saddle, but on the pre-purchase exam your vet finds an issue that may limit its ability to jump that high, does the horse's great temperament outweigh its performance limitations or vice versa? Are you sure you will have the horse forever or is there a chance you might sell it a few years down the road?

Exam Procedure

Pre-purchase exams will vary based on history and intended use of the horse as well as on the individual veterinarian. For instance, if you are looking for a young jumping prospect the pre-purchase exam will focus on the horse's athletic capability. However, if you are looking for a broodmare the exam will put more emphasis on the mare's reproductive health.

Each veterinarian has his or her own routine for pre-purchase exams and there is no one correct way as long as all of the important points are covered. In any case, the pre-purchase exam is generally composed of two parts. One is a complete physical exam that assesses general health status, heart and lung function, conformation, eye health, dental health, and will look for any visible external abnormalities on the body and limbs. The second portion consists of observing the horse in motion, usually both in hand and on a lunge line and sometimes under saddle as well. Depending on the location of the pre-purchase exam and availability of different footing surfaces, the veterinarian may want to

see the horse move on both hard and soft ground. Flexion tests, which put pressure and tension on particular joints and their associated soft tissue structures, are performed to see if any lameness can be elicited. For many practitioners, each leg is flexed twice, once for the distal limb (fetlock and below), and once for the upper limb (knee/elbow/shoulder in front and hock/stifle behind). A positive flexion cannot tell you exactly what structure is bothering the horse, but it can point out areas of potential concern that may warrant further investigation. As with all other parts of the exam, positive flexion tests need to be assessed in the context of the horse. An 18 year old show horse is much more likely to have some positive flexions than a 3 year old that's never been ridden.

Additional Diagnostics

Once the basic pre-purchase exam is completed, further diagnostics may be recommended. The most common of these is radiography (x-rays). Radiographs may be recommended if any abnormalities were detected on palpation of the limbs or neck, or if any lameness or positive flexion was noted during the exam. Radiographs may also be recommended based on the horse's age, history and intended use. Ultrasound imaging and endoscopy of the upper airways are also sometimes part of a pre-purchase exam, but on a much more limited basis. Basic blood work can be performed to assess internal organ function and systemic health, although it is unusual to find significant abnormalities in a horse that is otherwise healthy on the exam. In some cases testing for specific issues such as equine metabolic syndrome or Cushing's disease may be recommended. Drug testing for sedatives, NSAIDs (anti-inflammatories), and steroids is also available and performed on a case-by-case basis. Alternatively, blood can be sampled and frozen for future testing if the horse develops a behavioral or lameness issue later.

In some cases an abnormality or question arises during the pre-purchase exam that a general practitioner may not know the significance of. For example, an unusual cataract formation in the lens of an eye or a heart murmur may or may not be progressive. In some of these cases a consultation with a specialist such as an ophthalmologist or cardiologist may be recommended.

The expense for numerous radiographs and other diagnostics can quickly add up, and your veterinarian can help you decide which diagnostics are likely to be most helpful. Buyer preference and experience as well as the asking price of the horse also factor in. Some buyers choose to have more extensive radiographs and other diagnostics performed as "baseline" testing for comparison down the road, or simply for peace of mind. Other buyers are willing to take more of a risk and don't want any imaging performed. The higher the purchase price of the horse, the more diagnostics may be requested to protect the financial investment. If the horse is intended for resale or is young and still growing, a more complete set of radiographs may be very beneficial.

"Free" Horses Are Not Necessarily Free

Even individuals that are considering adopting a horse for "free" should strongly consider having a basic pre-purchase exam done. A horse that has any significant health issues can be very costly to treat and maintain in the long run. Even if you don't care that

the horse has any health problems, your veterinarian can identify existing issues and come up with an early intervention plan that can maintain the horse's health and minimize costs for as long as possible.

Numerous chapters and articles have been written on the specifics of the equine pre-purchase exam, and the details are far too much to cover in this article. Knowing what to expect from a pre-purchase exam, preparing yourself, and maintaining excellent communication with your veterinarian will help make the process as beneficial and stress-free as possible.