

Are You Ready for a Horse?

By Jen Reid

Horses are rewarding companions and incredible teachers, but they require a serious commitment of your time, money and energy. Before bringing a horse into your family, make sure you are fully informed about what to expect.



What costs are involved in having a horse?

The money needed to buy or adopt a horse is only the beginning. The real financial commitment comes once you bring your new horse home. Horses require very specific and often very costly care. Here are just a few examples of the routine maintenance things that an average healthy horse will need:

Farrier care. Since horses' feet grow just like our fingernails do, they need to be tended to about every eight weeks. Severe lameness problems and even death can result from neglected feet. Some horses do very well just having their feet trimmed and walking around barefoot. Other horses may require shoeing. A farrier is a trained professional whose job it is to evaluate the needs of your horse's hooves and maintain them accordingly. To get an inkling of how a horse with ill-fitting shoes feels, imagine walking around all day in shoes that don't fit. Now imagine that your feet hurt, you weigh 1,000 pounds and you can't take those shoes off! There's an old saying in the horse world: "No hoof equals no horse."

Feed. How you feed your horse will vary greatly, depending on where your horse lives. Some horses are fortunate enough to live in large pastures where they can graze away all day. Some horses, though, can't be left in a pasture due to problems like founder and obesity. Most horses need to be fed by people every day. There are a wide variety of feeds available for horses: grass hays, alfalfa, cubes (hay that has been processed into tightly compacted cubes), grains, processed feeds, brans, and many more. Availability and price will vary with where you live but, as a rough estimate, you can figure that your horse will eat about three tons of hay per year. Plus, horses often need vitamin and mineral supplements, psyllium (to prevent colic), and other supplements for specific ailments.

Vet care. Like any pet, horses require routine veterinary care. For the average healthy horse, this will include vaccinations twice a year, a worming program, and dental work at least once a year. (Horses' teeth grow throughout their lives and wear to very sharp points that can cut the tongue and cheeks if they are not routinely filed off.) Aside from routine care, there is always the possibility that your horse may require emergency care for problems like colic, lacerations, or lameness. Specialized veterinary care for a horse, especially if it involves boarding, is considerably more expensive than for a dog or a cat.

Housing. Providing a safe, healthy place for your horse to live can be one of the biggest challenges about owning a horse. You may own sufficient land to fence in a pasture for your horses, or you may need to board your horse with someone else. Either way, there are a few things to consider. Horses are herd animals and take comfort in having other horses to hang out with. They are also grazing animals that will walk on average 20 miles a day in the wild. Confining a solitary horse to a small area where he can't move around and exercise can lead to many behavioral and health problems.

Furthermore, there are several types of fencing used to enclose pastures and not all fences are right for all horses. At Best Friends, we never recommend barbed wire, but some horses have lived in it all their lives and know enough to stay out of it. Most horses do well with smooth wire fences, no-climb fences (wire that is woven into squares), wooden fences, electric fencing, vinyl fencing, or some combination thereof. With any type of fencing, you are going to have maintenance issues. Wire fences should be kept stretched tight and the posts stable, wooden fences are very likely to be chewed up by the horses, vinyl fences can break (especially in colder climates), and electric fences can short out. So, whether you choose to keep your horse on your own land or board her on someone else's, make sure that it's safe, that she has a friend or two, and that she has some room to move around.

How are horses different from other pets?

A horse is not a dog. This may sound like a pretty obvious statement, but it's very common for people new to horses to fall back on what they already have experience with – which very often is dogs. Horses are prey animals, dogs are predators and their responses to human interaction are completely different. If you're going to have a horse, it is your responsibility to become well informed about their care, behavior and needs. While there is outright intentional abuse that occurs, more often than not, horses are unintentionally abused or neglected out of ignorance.

How can I learn more about horses?

Before you make the commitment of adding a horse to your family, try to learn all you can about these wonderful animals and get some hands-on experience. Here are some suggestions:

Volunteer at your local horse rescue group. You can meet a wide variety of horses and work with people who can teach you how to be around them safely. It's also an opportunity to learn how to avoid many common problems that result in horses being relinquished to rescue groups.

Take lessons with a reputable instructor. Learning how to “speak horse” and understanding what they are trying to tell you (and what you may be unintentionally telling them) is a lifelong process, but having someone who already knows the language makes learning a whole lot easier.

Lease a horse. Sometimes this is a good precursor to buying or adopting a horse. You get some idea of what it's like to own a horse without the final responsibility.

How do I choose the right horse?

If you decide you are ready to bring a horse into your life, make sure you get a horse that matches your abilities. With any pet, it's important to get the right "fit," but it's especially crucial when selecting a horse, since they are very large animals and they can be dangerous to be around. Building a trusting and mutually beneficial relationship can't happen if you're scared to even go near the horse. Find an experienced person who can help you pick out the right horse – you and the horse will be happier in the long run. Think about getting an older horse; they can be some of the best teachers. Younger horses will need to be taught many things as they grow up.

How long of a commitment is it?

Just like people, all horses eventually reach an age when they are looking to retire. A well-cared for horse can easily live into his 30s and he will require care once his riding days are over. Before you get a horse, give some thought to whether you are willing and able to care for a horse who is no longer sound enough to ride, due to age or injury. Almost every horse will need such care, and no horse should ever be abandoned or sold for slaughter because he is no longer "useful." Plan ahead and give your faithful riding companion the retirement he deserves.

Finally, remember that even though taking a horse into your family is a long-term commitment, it's a commitment that can be more rewarding with every year that passes.

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