



**T**his is the time of year when the greatest numbers of horses are bought. A horse purchase should not be taken lightly. Whether you pay \$500 or \$50,000 for a horse, a pre-purchase exam should be performed. A pre-purchase exam is designed to point out potential problems a horse may have and determine if the horse would be suitable for the intended use. A potential buyer should buy a horse with the head and not let the heart into the equation. Don't get too attached to the idea of one horse before the pre-purchase exam. This can lead to disappointment if the horse is lame or has a problem that makes it an unsuitable purchase. Buying a horse with a known lameness or other health problem may result in an unfavorable experience and vet bills to diagnose or treat problems that had been identified during the pre-purchase.

A pre-purchase exam is meant only to point out potential problems, not to diagnose a lameness or a disease. Additionally, it's important to remember the pre-purchase exam is a snapshot in time of a horse's life. It does not imply that the horse will not develop future medical or lameness problems. Most vets do not pass or fail a horse on a pre-purchase exam. They only point out problems. It's up to each individual buyer to determine if the problems are worth taking on.

### Basics of the pre purchase exam

#### What is the intended use for this horse?

This is the first important question to address. The qualities necessary for a pleasure or occasional trail horse are much different from those of a second level dressage horse. For example, a horse that's over at the knee, has sore feet, or a pronounced sway back may make a great trail horse for a child. This same horse may have difficulty staying sound as a second level dressage horse.

### The physical exam

The physical exam is divided into nine different body systems as well as an evaluation of the horse's conformation. Each of the horse's body systems is examined for abnor-

malities and potential problems. Remember, the pre-purchase exam is only evaluating the horse during a short period of time. The pre-purchase exam isn't a guarantee the horse won't have future lameness or medical problems.

**To Buy or Not to Buy?  
The Pre-purchase Exam**  
By Julie Cook, DVM

#### Cardiovascular exam -

Listening to the heart rate and rhythm with a stethoscope can detect horses with heart murmurs or rhythm problems. The jugular veins and gums are also examined for any abnormalities. Problems associated with the cardiovascular system are not common, but if present may inhibit a horse from a performance career.

**Respiratory exam -** A stethoscope is also used to evaluate the trachea, the lung sounds, and respiration rate. The nostrils are examined for discharge or abnormalities. An endoscopic exam can be performed to determine the function of the throat in the breathing process. Endoscopy is an optional exam, but very important in the dressage horse. The dressage horse is asked to perform on the bit which can put more stress on the throat.

**Gastrointestinal exam -** The consistency of the manure is examined as well as the fiber length. The fiber length indicates if the horse is chewing food normally or needs its teeth floated. An oral exam is performed to determine the condition of the teeth and mouth. The horse should be checked for the presence of an old abdominal incision to determine if the horse has had previous colic surgery. Finally, listening to the intestines with a stethoscope will determine if motility appears normal at the time of the exam. Questions about previous colic episodes can also be posed at this time.

**Immune system -** The vaccine history should be gathered at the time of the pre-purchase exam. In central Kentucky, for instance, the lack of West Nile vaccination may be cause for concern. It is certainly a disease prevalent in this area and extremely important to vaccinate against.

**Ophthalmological exam -** The equine athlete's eyes are often overlooked. An exam to determine that both eyes are visual and without defects is extremely important.



**Integumentary exam** - The skin is the largest organ system of the body and should be examined to determine if the horse is free of external parasites or skin disease. The presence of a dull hair coat and an unkempt appearance may be due to an underlying metabolic disease.

**Reproductive exam** - This is an important exam for a horse whose primary purpose is breeding. The reproductive system can be overlooked in the case of a horse which is intended for a performance horse. The external genitalia will be examined for abnormalities in either case. A mare's ovaries and uterus may be palpated rectally to determine any abnormalities. A breeding stallion's exam may include a semen sample to evaluate sperm count and viability and to determine adequate testicle size.

**Conformation evaluation** - Taking into account that no horse is truly perfect, a prospective owner must decide what deviations from normal will be acceptable. The vet can help the buyer assess conformation issues that may eventually lead to soundness problems. For example, a horse with offset knees may develop splints, or a horse over at the knees may develop chips in the knee joints. These deviations from normal conformation may be acceptable in the occasionally ridden trail horse or pasture ornament, but pose potential problems for a dressage horse ridden hard five to six days a week. The risk of potential problems must be weighed with the intended use and unhappiness of the owner if the horse becomes lame and requires time off. These factors are different for every buyer and horse.

**Musculoskeletal exam** - The horse's joints are palpated for increased joint fluid, heat, or pain on standing flexion. The muscles are then palpated for symmetry, pain, heat, or any other abnormality. Hoof-testers are placed on both front feet to determine if pain is elicited. Pain over the navicular bones in the case of a quarter horse with small feet may point out a potential problem.

**Neurological exam** - An abbreviated neurological exam is included in the pre-purchase exam. Turning a horse in small circles will show if the horse is aware of where its legs are. A horse that steps on itself or stumbles may have neurologic deficits.

### The lameness exam

Once the organ systems and conformation have been evaluated, a thorough lameness exam is performed. The exam can include flexion tests, jogging the horse in a straight line, jog-

ging in a circle, lunging, and sometimes evaluating the horse under saddle. Many flexion tests are performed on certain joints to determine if pain is elicited, resulting in lameness. Certain flexion tests may produce lameness that is not as concerning as others. A horse may flex lame to its hocks and its front ankles. The positive hock flexion may not be nearly as much of a problem as the ankle lameness. If a horse is determined to be lame on pre-purchase, the exam may be stopped. A horse may have a temporary problem like a stone bruise, but on that day and at that time it was lame. Some buyers choose to do another pre-purchase exam after the horse becomes sound, or they may cut their losses and move on to another horse.

### Radiographs

Some buyers request a full set of x-rays as part of the pre-purchase. Radiographs of joints and bones may reveal potential problems apparent during the physical exam. Other buyers will only have x-rays taken of joints which have increased joint fluid or pain noted on flexion. While radiographs add to the cost of the pre-purchase exam, they often answer questions associated with particular joints. Buyers, who don't have any radiographs taken, must assume the risk of not revealing a potential problem.

### Blood work

Blood work can be the final step in a pre-purchase exam. The date of the last Coggins is often requested. Also, some buyers request blood to be tested for the presence of drugs that may mask pain or bad behavior. These tests are not a bad idea. However, it takes several days to a week for results and costs \$150.

**T**he pre-purchase exam is an in-depth and important piece of information about a new horse, but it's just one piece of the puzzle. The information gained from the pre-purchase exam should be combined with other factors such as the temperament and cost of the horse, the intended use, and the experience of the rider. Pick a horse that is at your skill level and one that can grow as your skills do. Pick a healthy one that will fit into your lifestyle. Avoiding mismatches will make you and the horse much happier. ♦

*Julie Cook, DVM, a KDA member, can be reached at [Lexdvm@aol.com](mailto:Lexdvm@aol.com).*