



Pre-Purchase Examinations “Vettings”

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Before buying a horse, it is important to consider having a pre-purchase examination (PPE), often referred to as a “vetting”, in order to make every effort to ensure the horse you are taking home is suitable for the purpose for which you wish to use it.

As a veterinary practice, we find that there are often aspects about the vetting that a purchaser or vendor are unsure about or have misunderstood, particularly since small changes were made to the forms used for the PPE in 2011. Here we will try to explain the different types of vetting, why each is relevant to a different situation and what is required of both a purchaser and a vendor.



The purchaser’s assessment of the horse/pony

Before having your potential new horse vetted, we recommend that you spend a bit of time with the horse in the stables, as well as riding it to confirm it is suitable for the purpose you wish him or her to perform. It may be useful to check on the following points:

- Does the horse have a passport? – check the markings, microchip, the age on the passport and its vaccination status.
- Has it any vices? See the horse in its own environment and at rest in the stable.
- Does the horse have any obvious conformational faults/scarring/warts? Does it have splints/curbs/warts/sarcoids or melanomas if it is a grey?
- Make a note of anything you are unsure of to alert the vet to at the pre-purchase examination.
- You could ask the vendor to see the medical records for the horse.

Which vetting should I have?

There are 2 types of vetting: the 2-Stage or the 5-Stage, which are based on the examination procedures recommended by the British Equine Veterinary Association / Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. The stages involved are:

Stage 1: Preliminary examination

This is a thorough external examination of the animal at rest using visual observation, palpation and manipulation to detect clinically apparent signs of injury, disease or physical abnormality. It includes an examination of the incisor teeth, a thorough examination of the horse’s eyes in a darkened area and auscultation of the horse’s heart and lungs at rest.

Stage 2: Walk and trot, in hand

The animal is walked and then trotted in hand to detect abnormalities of gait and action. Ideally this is carried out on firm, level ground. The horse is turned sharply each way and is backed for a few paces. Flexion tests of all four limbs and trotting in a circle on a firm surface may be carried out if the examining veterinary surgeon considers it safe and appropriate to do so.

Flexion tests and trotting in a circle on a firm surface are not mandatory parts of the standard procedure, but they can sometimes provide useful additional information about a horse. There may be circumstances when the examining veterinary surgeon concludes that it is unsafe or inappropriate to perform such tests.



Stage 3: Exercise phase

The horse is usually ridden and given sufficient exercise to:

1. Allow assessment of the horse when it has an increased breathing effort and an increased heart rate.
2. Allow assessment of the horse's gait at walk, trot, canter and, if appropriate, gallop.
3. Allow assessment of the horse for the purpose of stage five.

If ridden exercise is not possible for any reason then this stage may be conducted by exercising the horse on a lunge, but this fact should be made clear to the purchaser and on the certificate.

Stage 4: Period of rest and re-examination

The horse is allowed to stand quietly for a period. During this time the respiratory and cardiovascular systems may be monitored as they return to their resting levels.

Stage 5: Second trot up

The animal is trotted in hand again to look for any signs of strains or injuries made evident by the exercise and rest stages.



A 2-Stage vetting is often appropriate if the horse is unbroken or if you have previously had the horse on loan, but it is important to be aware that a 2-Stage vetting is limited in its scope, and may not detect important clinical findings that may influence your decision on whether to purchase the horse.

If you are going to insure the horse it is worth contacting the insurance company and asking whether they will require any additional tests, e.g x-rays. If you are paying a lot of money for the horse, you may want to have x-rays of the feet, hocks and/or fetlocks and stifles done, or have blood samples taken. Further examinations via x-rays/ultrasound scans or endoscopy may be recommended by the vet depending on what is found during the vetting. The horse will be identified during the examination via a diagram and written description, and by microchip (if one present). The vet will most likely ask to examine the horse's passport to confirm the identity of the horse, but it does remain the responsibility of the purchaser to satisfy themselves as to the ownership of the horse and to verify the records of any microchip with the relevant database.

Arranging the vetting

It is useful to use a vet to perform the examination who you already know, since they will know your requirements, and therefore your expectations of the animal. If the horse is too far away for your usual vet to visit, ask them to recommend a vet in that area.

You should arrange the vetting yourself, rather than the vendor. Use your own vet or an independent vet not used by the vendor. Remember the vet is employed by you and should only report to you; although if the vet does find some problems with the horse it is usually considered fair to inform the current owner, especially where this constitutes a welfare issue.

Sometimes though your vet may be the same as the vendors, but because of your relationship with your vet you may still want them or another vet from the same Practice to carry out the vetting; the vet should inform you of their relationship with both parties. In this case your vet will though have access to the horse's medical records for its treatment under their Practice; the vet is required to give an opinion regarding the significance of any veterinary history held. This is now documented on the new vetting certificate.

It is generally a good idea to attend the vetting so that if the vet has any queries, they can be discussed at the time. If not, speak to the vet before they attend so that you can ask any pertinent questions before the visit.

The aim of the vetting is to carry out a thorough and complete veterinary examination of the chosen horse, and to identify and attempt to assess those factors of a veterinary nature that may affect the horses suitability for its intended use so that the prospective purchaser can make an informed decision as to whether or not to proceed with the chosen purchase.

The opinion given by the vet relates to that day and no long term guarantee can be given on the long term implications of anything found.

When you contact your vet to book the vetting make sure you have the following details ready:

1. A full description of the horse including height, age, colour and sex
2. The vendors details – their name and telephone number and the address of where with horse is to be vetted.
3. The intended use of the horse.

The facilities required for the vetting (both 2 and 5-Stage) are:

1. A loose box where the light can be restricted for examination of the eyes
2. A hard level area to trot up – preferably concrete or tarmac

3. A firm non slip surface for lunging.

For a 5-Stage vetting the following are also required:

1. An area to exercise the horse.
2. An appropriate jockey to ride the horse, or someone capable of lunging the horse if it is unbroken.



If these facilities are not available at the vendor's premises, then the horse should be taken to a yard where the facilities are more suitable.

The vendor needs to be able to provide the above facilities and also:

1. Make sure the feet have been well trimmed or that the horse has been shod recently.
2. Ensure that the horse is clean and presentable.
3. Ensure that there is someone capable of handling the horse and that the horse is used to being handled – especially in the case of youngstock.

At the end of the vetting, a blood sample can be taken to be stored for up to 6 months. If in this time the horse should go lame or its behaviour change so that it would appear it had been under undisclosed drug or medication treatment whilst being tried by the purchaser or at the time of the vetting, the blood may be sent to a laboratory and tested.

As part of the new certificate, the prospective purchaser is now advised that where possible, and if required, it should be confirmed that they are able to obtain suitable insurance cover before purchasing the horse. It is also advised that you should consider obtaining a warranty from the seller with respect to vices, previous conditions or surgery, and other significant information prior to purchase. Neither of these is a requirement, but may be helpful if there are any issues with the horse after the purchase has been completed.

Main Changes to the PPE

In September 2011 the PPE was updated to reflect current veterinary practice, RCVS Guidance. To support this the certificate given to the prospective purchaser was also updated. The key changes were:

Key facts:

- (1) The new certificate records whether the seller or their agent are clients of the examining veterinary surgeon or their practice.
- (2) The new certificate records whether the examining veterinary surgeon or their practice have attended the horse and if they have, an opinion is given regarding the significance of any veterinary history.
- (3) Flexion tests and trotting on a circle on a tight surface are still not mandatory parts of the examination because, although they can be useful, there may be occasions when they are inappropriate, unsuitable, unsafe or impossible to perform. However, many purchasers expect them to be performed and so the new certificate records whether or not they were done. If they were not performed, the certificate also records the reasons for omitting them.
- (4) If a blood sample was not taken then the reason for omitting it is recorded on the certificate.
- (5) The new certificate has advice regarding a seller's warranty and obtaining insurance.
- (6) The term "aged" now refers to horses considered to be over 15 years old, whereas previously it could be used for horses considered to be over 8 years old. This is not the result of a change in the understanding of ageing horse by dentition but because calling a horse "aged" when it might be less than 15 years old does not reflect common usage of the term.

Reader's Questions

1 .I'm thinking of buying a horse in Worcestershire - but is it feasible to ask my current vet to carry out the pre-purchase examination, even though it's out of his area?

Yes, although you will need to consider the additional cost as this will mean you are using your vet's services for a prolonged period of time (potentially a whole day). You can also ask your vet to recommend an independent vet in the area to carry out the vetting.

2 .Can you explain the purpose of the flexion test and why there is some controversy surrounding the test?

Flexion tests are used to highlight issues with joint, ligament or tendon pain that may not be immediately apparent on a straightforward trot up. They are controversial in their interpretation as different vets accept different levels of lameness post-flexion. The results of flexion tests are viewed in light of the age of the horse, prior injuries, degree and duration of post-flexion lameness and the purpose for which the horse is intended.

3 .What are some of the most common miss-understandings about vetting's?

That the vetting is an "insurance policy" against future conditions, and that every condition is examined for. Purchasers should be aware, for example, that the vetting does not include examination of the teeth using a gag or speculum, and that the reproductive tract of a mare is not examined unless being sold specifically as a broodmare. Medical issues are not always black and white – so the results of the vetting are only **in the opinion** of the vet **on the balance of probabilities**.

4. If the horse fails, what would be the next step? In other words is a failed vetting 'the end?'

A horse does not "fail" a vetting - your vet will examine the horse and give their opinion, based on what they've seen that day, whether the horse is "suitable for purchase", i.e. whether it is capable of performing the job for which you intend to use it. Should the horse be deemed unsuitable, it may be appropriate to have the horse re-examined at a later date, potentially after receiving treatment, or, if you are satisfied to purchase the horse regardless of the results of the initial examination, it may be possible negotiate a lower price with the vendor.

5. Are there any instances when you might not advise a purchaser to get the horse vetted?

In general, no. Some purchasers may feel that the cost is unjustified if the sale value of the horse is low, but we would always advise a prior-to-purchase examination, even if only a limited examination is performed.

7. What new diagnostic tools do you use nowadays that weren't available ten years ago?

You may want to discuss with your vet whether it is appropriate to carry out additional examinations such as x-rays, endoscopy or ultrasound to support the vetting procedure, and occasionally these may be required for insurance, or if the horse is to be exported to a specific country that requests this. Many practices have digital x-ray systems that allows x-rays to be taken and viewed at the time of the vetting. MRI and nuclear scintigraphy (bone scan) are more widely available now, but are currently very rarely used in pre-purchase examinations.