

CASTRATION ~ Understanding and accepting the risks

When?

There are differing opinions on when is best to castrate. Some advise between 6-18th months for ease and with the hope there will be fewer post-op complications. There is no scientific evidence to suggest that castrating earlier will affect their development compared to colts castrated later.

Before castration, two descended testicles need to be present. If only one has dropped then more time may be required to see if it will drop on its own accord. Otherwise, surgery under a general anesthetic or standing laparoscopy is necessary to find the rig (retained testicle).

It is normally advised for the procedure to be carried out in Spring or Autumn because this helps reduce infection from either flies or the mud.

It is also advisable to vaccinate against tetanus prior to surgery. If vaccination status isn't up to date then a tetanus antiserum can be given on the day.

Where?

A clean environment to minimise risk of infection is important. This can be carried out on your property to save travelling but the area ideally needs to be dry, clean and not dusty. The procedure is either performed standing under local sedation or by field anaesthesia where the horse is anaesthetised and laid down. If it is not possible to provide a suitable environment for the surgery then referral to a hospital or clinic may be advisable.

The Procedure

There are two types of procedures: Open or closed.

Open: Incisions are made in to the scrotum and through the vaginal tunic, which covers the testicles. This completely exteriorises the testicles and after the spermatic cord and blood vessels have been crushed the incisions are left open for them to drain naturally. No sutures are used.

Closed: This involves the various layers to be sutured together after removing the testicles. This helps to prevent any hernias but the procedure should be carried out in a hospital setting under a general anaesthetic, which also has its own associated risks.

General Anaesthetic:

- Requires the horse to be starved for 12 hours prior to surgery.
- General anaesthetics carry their own risks (cardiac arrest, poor recovery, tissue damage, bone fractures, post anaesthetic colic, myopathy and neuropathy)
- Financially more expensive

Risks Associated with Castration

1 – Infection

Infection is a common complication following castration. The open technique has a higher chance of becoming infected compared to the closed technique. If infection following surgery does occur then usually a course of antibiotics is prescribed. A minority of cases that don't heal may require a second surgery to resect the infected tissue. Things to look out for are increased swelling, discharge, fever discomfort and lameness.

2 – Swelling

Post-operative swelling is a normal event and will usually reach its maximum around day 3-5. The swelling should resolve on its own by day 10-12 with the aid of gentle exercise and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. If swelling persists for any longer then infection should be suspected and appropriate treatment started. Older horses can be more prone to post-operative swelling than younger colts.

3 – Haemorrhage

A small amount of bleeding from the surgical incision is normal following castration. The drips of blood should be easy to count. If however there are more and the bleeding doesn't resolve then veterinary advice should be sought. The stump may need re-clamping or a ligament placed. Packing the area with swabs may also help. Extensive haemorrhage is rare but when it does occur referral to a hospital is advised for surgical invention and fluid therapy if too much blood has been lost.

4- Herniation

Sometimes abdominal contents can herniate through the incision. This can be more common in younger colts. The closed technique will help to minimise the occurrence of herniation. Veterinary assistance should be sought straight away in this instance.

5 – Peritonitis

Septic peritonitis very rarely occurs but there is the potential for infection to spread to the abdominal cavity. Signs to be aware of include depression, fever, anorexia, colic and high heart rate. Veterinary assistance is required to take a sample of fluid from the abdomen to analyse whether it is septic or not.

Post-op Care

Your horse will require rest for 24hrs following surgery. Daily observations will help to identify any issues early and gentle cleaning may be required. It will then need gentle exercise to encourage natural drainage from the site and reduce the complications involved with swelling. Usually a short course of antibiotics and anti-inflammatories are prescribed too.

Things to look for after castration:

- Swelling
- Haemorrhage
- Discharge
- Hindlimb lameness
- Colic
- Inappetence
- Fever

If there are any concerns at all then it is best to call your vet for advice.

By engaging our services you agree to our general terms and conditions and therefore understand and accept the above risks associated with castration.