

Do horse owners know how to care for their horses?

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Horse owners have a duty of care to safeguard the wellbeing of horses in their care. However, within recreational equine populations, a substantial proportion of welfare problems reported are linked to unintentional neglect due to owner ignorance. This study assessed the equine knowledge base in a preliminary sample of UK horse-owners (n=128) with variable educational achievements (low, no degree: n=74, medium: undergraduate degree, n=27, high: postgraduate qualification, n=27). Respondents (horse owners/riders, >18 years) completed 40 voluntary equine-related questions in an online multiple-choice survey, distributed via equine-related Facebook™ sites, covering topics related to equine management, health, behaviour and welfare, categorised as easy (n=14), medium (n=14) and hard (n=12). The majority of respondents answered 'easy' questions correctly (78.71%), with 18.36% selecting incorrect answers and 2.93% stating they didn't know the correct answer. Less than half of the participants answered 'medium' questions correctly (47.29%), with 31.51% selecting the incorrect answer and 21.21% not knowing the correct answer. Even fewer respondents attained the correct answer for the 'hard' questions (21.51%), with the majority either selecting the incorrect response (46.17%) or not knowing the correct answer (32.32%). Differences in correct responses between the question categories were significant (ANOVA: $P=0.0001$, $f=25.18$, $df=2$), with post-hoc analyses revealing participants selected more correct 'easy' answers compared to 'medium' (LSD: $p=0.001$; means: 78.71% vs 47.29%), and 'hard' answers (LSD: $p=0.001$; means: 78.71% vs. 21.51%), and more 'medium' than 'hard' (LSD: $p=0.003$; means: 47.29% vs 21.51%) answers. Interestingly, it appears participants increased their selection of 'don't know' as their preferred response as question difficulty increased; 'don't know' responses increased between the 'easy' and 'medium' questions (LSD: $p=0.004$; means: 2.91% vs 21.21%) and 'easy' to 'hard' questions (LSD: $p=0.0001$; means: 2.91% vs. 32.32%). Respondents selected more incorrect responses between the 'easy' and 'hard' question categories (LSD: $P=0.001$; means: 18.36% vs. 46.17%) but the number of incorrect answers did not differ between the 'easy' and 'medium' categories ($P>0.05$). Key areas where participant knowledge was poor included recommended forage to concentrate ratio (52.71% incorrect), identification of the signs of colic (41.09%) and recommended shoeing interval (49.46% incorrect). These results suggest a lack of fundamental knowledge exists in these horse owners, which has the potential to negatively impact equine health and welfare. Further research is needed to identify if this is a universal phenomenon in the equine industry and to explore strategies to educate horse owners and by association improve equine wellbeing.

Lay person message: Horse owners need to understand how to correctly care and manage the horses in their care to prevent health and welfare issues. Despite this, formal qualifications are not required before you can own a horse. We surveyed 128 horse owners using a 40 question quiz to establish their equine knowledge base. Over half the owners incorrectly answered medium and hard questions, and poor knowledge regarding basic nutrition and management was found. This weak knowledge base could lead to unintentional neglect or cause detrimental welfare to the horses in their care. Educating horse owners is essential to promote equine wellbeing.

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