

1st Edition



**HORSE
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EQUINE WELFARE GOOD PRACTICES GUIDE

PROMOTER

DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONALIZATION PROGRAM FOR THE AGRO-EQUESTRIAN SECTOR



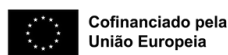
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Equine Welfare Good Practices Guide.

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A photograph of three brown horses in a grassy field with snow-capped mountains in the background. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark blue rectangle on the left side, which contains the title text.

INTRODUCTION



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INTRODUCTION

The **Horse Economic Forum**, a leading initiative dedicated to strengthening and promoting the Equine Economy, is proud to present the first edition of the **Equine Welfare Best Practices Guide**. Born from a firm commitment to the sustainable development of the equestrian sector, this guide emerges as an essential tool for all those who share the responsibility for the welfare of horses — regardless of their breed, purpose, or context of use.

Conceived within the scope of the Horse Economic Forum, held in **Alter do Chão, Portugal**, this document reflects the spirit of the event: to promote innovation, awareness, and excellence in every dimension of the relationship between humans and horses. More than just a compilation of recommendations, this guide represents a vision — that it is both possible and necessary to align technical and scientific knowledge with everyday practice, ensuring that horses live with dignity, health, and quality.



The recommendations presented here have been carefully selected based on updated and applicable evidence, always with the aim of making essential knowledge accessible: **best practices that can be implemented by professionals, caregivers, breeders, and all those involved in the equine value chain.**

By making this guide available, the Horse Economic Forum reaffirms its commitment to the ethical and sustainable evolution of the sector, contributing to a future in which the horse holds a place of respect, care, and value.

We invite all readers to use this material as a tool for transformation and sharing — so that, together, we can build a better world for our horses.

Enjoy your reading!



Chapter 2.

THE HORSE: A SENTIENT BEING

Since 2012, **animal sentience** has received formal scientific recognition through a declaration signed by a group of renowned international scientists and neuroscientists.¹

The concept of sentience is closely linked to a living being's ability to experience subjective states — **such as pain, pleasure, fear, or comfort** — and to respond to these stimuli in ways that demonstrate awareness of their environment and their own physical and emotional condition.

¹ Low, P. *The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness. Proceedings of the Francis Crick Memorial Conference, Churchill College, Cambridge University, July 7 2012*, pp 1-2.



In this context, recognising **the horse as a sentient being** — capable of sensations and emotions — is an essential step. This understanding forms the foundation upon which best practices aimed at promoting equine welfare, health, and quality of life can be truly effective. Without this ethical and scientific premise, any attempt at improvement lacks depth and coherence.



Chapter 3.

WHAT IS ANIMAL WELFARE?

Animal welfare has become an increasingly discussed topic today — a reflection of society's growing concern about how we interact with animals and the impact these interactions have on their lives.

But what exactly is meant by animal welfare? According to Donald M. Broom, researcher and professor recognised as one of the founders of Animal Welfare Science, the concept can be defined as **“the state of the individual as it attempts to cope with its environment.”**²

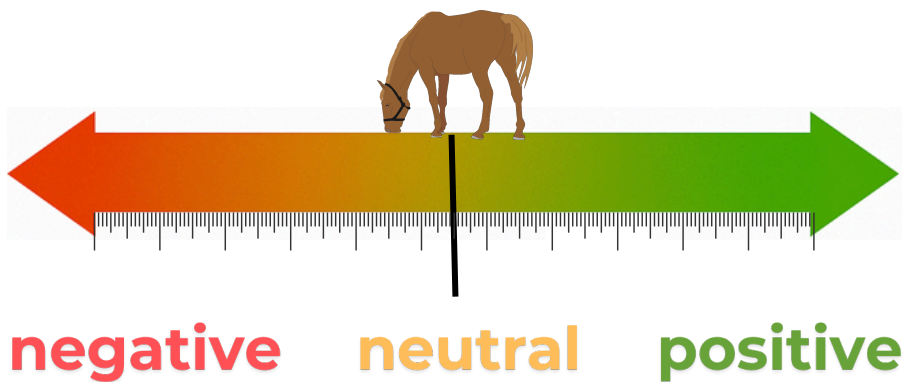
In simple terms, Broom associates welfare with the animal's ability to handle the challenges and stimuli of its surroundings. He also emphasises that welfare is not a fixed state, but a **dynamic condition** that can range from very negative to very positive over time.

²Broom, D.M. 1986. Indicators of poor welfare. *British Veterinary Journal*, 142(6): 524-526.



ANIMAL WELFARE

Dynamic Condition



Furthermore, it is essential to understand that welfare refers to a state, a condition inherent to the individual at a given moment or circumstance, and not something that can simply be “given” to the animal.

In other words, **no one can “offer” welfare to a horse; rather, we can provide more appropriate conditions that enable it to adapt effectively to the environment in which it lives.**

Therefore, adopting best practices that support the horse’s adaptation to its surroundings — and consequently improve its level of welfare — is our ethical and responsible duty.

In the following chapters of this guide, you will find a set of **practical recommendations** on how to implement measures that promote good behaviour, good feeding, good health, and a good environment for horses.



A close-up photograph of two horses nuzzling each other. The horse on the left is dark brown with a white blaze on its face. The horse on the right is a lighter brown. They are both looking towards the right. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green field.

BEHAVIOUR



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PRACTICES FOR GOOD BEHAVIOUR

Equine behaviour directly reflects their physical, emotional, and social well-being. For a safe and harmonious relationship between humans and horses, it is essential to respect their natural behavioural needs.

A lack of stimulation, restricted movement, or social isolation can lead to undesirable behaviours such as stereotypies (wood chewing, object biting, circling), aggression, or apathy. Therefore, creating an environment that supports the expression of natural behaviours is a fundamental aspect of ethical management.

This chapter presents **best practices that promote behavioural balance in horses**, help prevent disorders, and strengthen the positive relationship between the animals and the grooms, riders, and other team members who work with them.



UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOUR

Understand How Horses Behave.

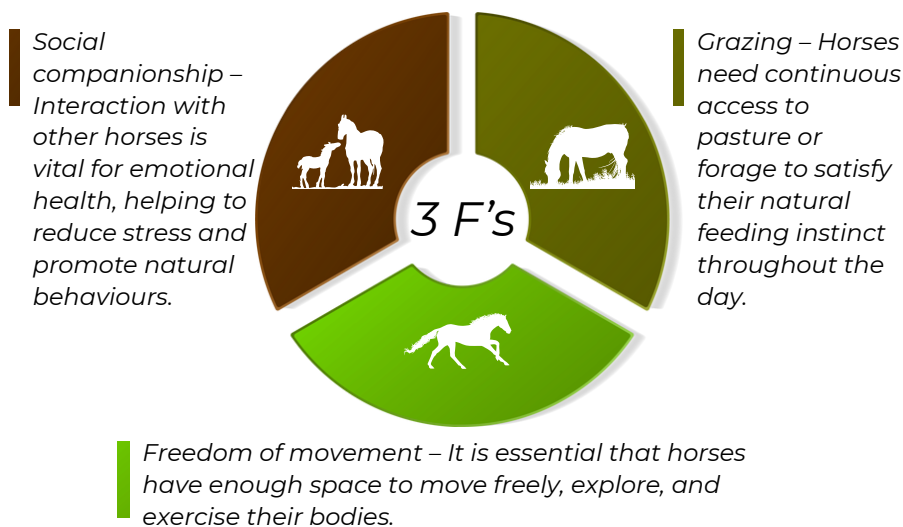
Horse behaviour is guided by natural instincts. As prey animals with a flight response, they react quickly to threats to protect themselves. They communicate through non-verbal cues, using posture, ears, tail, and facial expressions to convey emotions and intentions.

They live in groups with a defined social hierarchy, where each individual has a role. The need for constant movement is vital to their physical, mental, and digestive health, and is linked to their natural foraging behaviour, which can take up to 16 hours a day.

Horses are also highly reactive to their environment, sensitive to sounds, smells, and movements, which can cause stress if not properly managed. Curiosity and the urge to explore are part of their nature and help stimulate the brain and prevent boredom.



These essential behavioural needs are well represented in the concept of **the horse's 3 F's: friends, forage, and freedom** — three fundamental pillars for equine welfare and emotional balance.³



When these needs are not respected, the horse's quality of life is compromised. Therefore, it is essential to provide a routine compatible with its nature, always integrating the principles of the 3 F's into daily management whenever possible.

³Fraser, L 2012. *The Horse's Manifesto: What do we want?? Friends, Forage and Freedom!* International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. Available at: <https://iaabc.org/horse/the-horses-manifesto-what-do-we-want-friends-forage-and-freedom-part-1-of-3>



4.1.

SUPPORT FOR NATURAL BEHAVIOR

- Respect that the horse is a **social, gregarious, and prey animal with a natural flight instinct**;
- Encourage the **expression of natural behavioral patterns**, including movement, exploration, and social interaction;
- Whenever possible, **allow visual, auditory, and physical contact between horses**, respecting hierarchies and individual compatibilities;
- **Conduct gradual and supervised** removal or introduction of new animals to avoid conflicts and stress;
- Use **shared paddocks under supervision** for compatible animals, promoting natural interactions



4.2.

RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT

- Establish **consistent daily routines** that promote predictability and help reduce stressful situations;
- Observe and monitor the presence of **repetitive behaviors (stereotypies)**, such as wood chewing, aerophagia, head bobbing, among other signs that may indicate frustration, boredom, or environmental discomfort;
- Do not use methods that cause fear, pain, or distrust in the animal; instead, opt for **handling techniques** based on respect and the building of trust;
- Respect the **most sensitive areas of the horse's body**, avoiding sudden touches, unnecessary pressure, and the use of inappropriate or harsh brushes.



DETAILS THAT MATTER!

Did you know that touch is essential in communicating with horses?

A review study⁴, conducted by researchers from Sweden, France, and Australia, compiled current knowledge about the sensory abilities of horses with the aim of improving the quality of interactions between humans and horses.

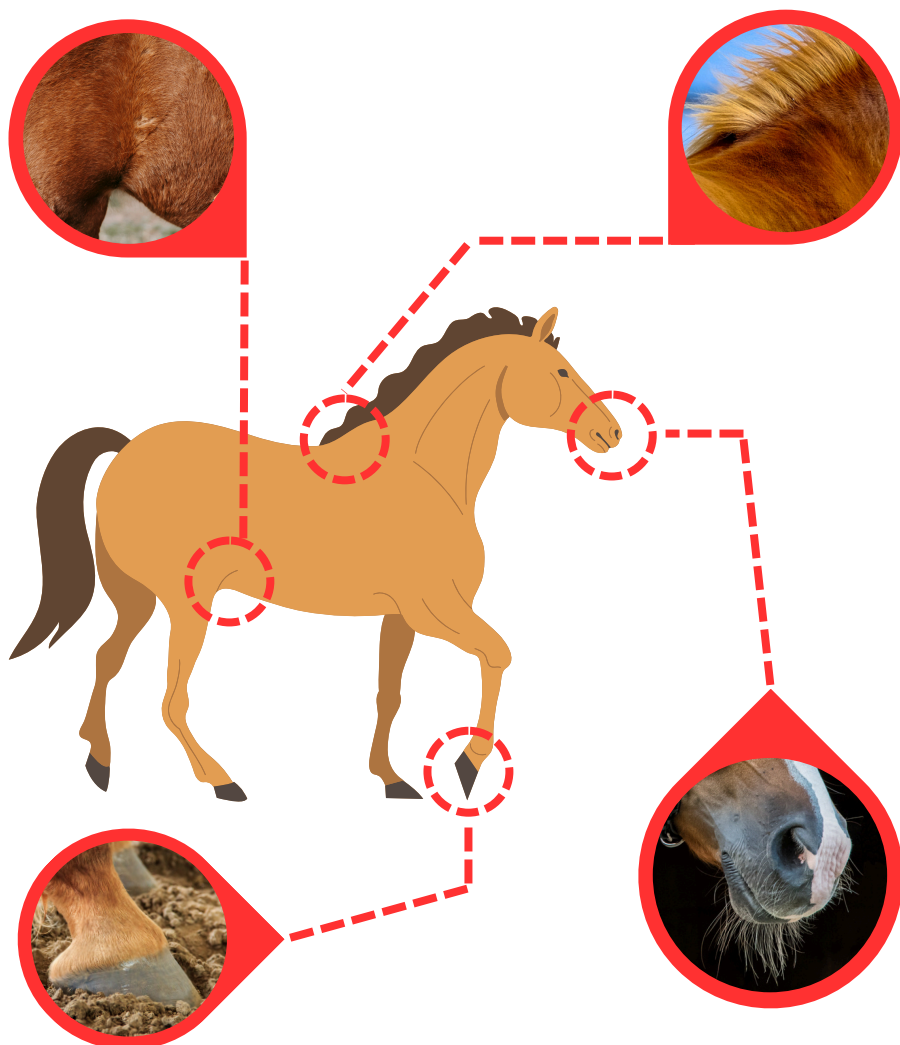
The research highlights that **the skin is the horse's largest sensory organ**, being sensitive to both thermal and mechanical stimuli. Therefore, touch plays an essential role in daily handling and communication with the animal.

Cutaneous sensitivity is not uniform across the body, varying according to the density and distribution of nerve receptors. Areas such as **the muzzle, withers, coronet band, and lower flank** are particularly more sensitive to contact.

⁴Rørvang, M.V.; Nielsen, B.L.; McLean, A.N. Sensory abilities of horses and their importance for equitation science. *Front. Vet. Sci.* 2020, 7, 633.



SENSITIVE AREAS



Ignoring these particularities can cause discomfort or even stress to the horse, negatively affecting its response to handling.

Therefore, it is essential to:

- Avoid sudden touches or unnecessary pressure;
- Use appropriate brushes and equipment;
- Respect signs of discomfort, such as backing away or defensive movements;
- Encourage positive contact, such as gentle grooming in preferred areas (like the withers).



*Studies indicate that touch stimulation, through grooming in the **withers area**, can have a **calming effect** on horses.^{5, 6}*

⁵Feh C, de Mazières J. Grooming at a preferred site reduces heart rate in horses. *Anim Behav.* (1993) 46:1191–4. 10.1006/anbe.1993.1309.

⁶Normando S, Haverbeke A, Meers L, Ödberg FO, Ibáñez Talegón M, Bono G. Effect of manual imitation of grooming on riding horses' heart rate in different environmental situations. *Vet Res Commun.* (2003) 27:615–7.



4.3.

ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT

- Promote **visual, auditory, and, if safe, physical contact** with other horses even within the stable environment;
- Vary the way food is provided by using hay nets (slow feeders) to **prolong foraging time**;
- Introduce **simple and positive training activities** with reinforcement, such as hand-walking, obstacles, or coordination exercises;
- Create partitions and barriers that allow **environmental variation** (e.g., resting areas, foraging zones, observation points);



➤ Play natural sounds or classical music **in moderation**: studies suggest that these sensory stimuli can promote calmer behavior;

➤ **Always proceed with the support of a veterinary team**, especially in clinical or metabolic cases.



Environmental enrichment
can be defined as any **modification to the environment** aimed at improving well-being through the introduction of species-appropriate **positive stimuli**.^{7, 8}

⁷Newberry, R. C. 1995. Environmental enrichment: increasing the biological relevance of captive environments. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 44(2): 229-243.

⁸Baumans, V. Environmental enrichment for laboratory rodents and rabbits: requirements of rodents, rabbits, and research. *ILAR Journal*, v. 46, n. 2, p. 162-170, 2005a.





FEEDING



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Chapter 5.

PRACTICES FOR GOOD FEEDING

Ensuring that horses receive a balanced diet tailored to their specific needs contributes to disease prevention, improved immune function, and maintenance of optimal body condition.

In this chapter, we present a set of **recommended practices to ensure good feeding**, based on widely recognized technical and scientific principles.



THE HORSE'S DIGESTIVE SYSTEM:

Main characteristics.

The horse is a monogastric herbivore, with a digestive system adapted for the slow and continuous intake of fiber throughout the day.

Its stomach has a small capacity and produces gastric acid constantly, even when fasting — therefore, fiber and saliva are essential to regulate acidity and protect the gastric mucosa.

Additionally, horses do not have a gallbladder, which makes fat digestion less efficient, emphasizing the importance of a balanced diet. Fiber fermentation occurs in the cecum and colon, supported by a microbiota sensitive to dietary changes.

Sudden changes in diet can disrupt this intestinal flora, leading to abnormal fermentation, a drop in pH, and an increased risk of digestive disorders.



5.1.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- Remember that proper feeding is directly related to the **health, performance, behavior, and longevity** of horses;
- Always consider **physiological and behavioral** needs, respecting the species' natural feeding patterns;
- The feeding plan should be developed with the **support of a veterinarian or equine nutritionist**, taking into account the life stage, type of activity, and body condition.



5.2.

FORAGE (PASTURE, HAY)

- Should form the **basis of the diet** – ideally at least 70% of the total;
- A horse **should consume** between 1.5% and 2.5% of its body weight in dry matter **per day**;
- Forage quality should be high: free from mold or pest infestation;
- Should be offered ad libitum (free access), preferably using alternatives that encourage natural feeding behavior (**e.g., slow feeders**).



The **continuous provision** of forage **prolongs** chewing time, **reduces** idleness, and **helps prevent** digestive and behavioral disorders.



DID YOU KNOW...?

Slow feeders provide benefits.

A recent study⁹ involving more than 1,200 horses in France, Belgium, and Switzerland revealed that this type of equipment — such as hay nets — is increasingly being used by caretakers and owners, with **multiple associated benefits**. The research shows that slow feeders help to:

- Reduce hay waste, dropping from up to 57% to just 6%, according to cited studies;
- Increase chewing time, respecting the horse's natural behaviour, as in the wild it can spend up to 16 hours a day grazing;
- Control body weight, especially in breeds prone to obesity;
- Decrease repetitive behaviors (stereotypies), which are common in stabled horses.

⁹Roig-Pons, I. Bachmann, S. Briefer Freymond. Slow-feeding dispensers for horses: Who, how and why? *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, Volume 79, 2025, Pages 7-18.



The study also reveals that **over 73% of users** distribute hay exclusively through these devices, and that **more than 500 participants** reported no disadvantages. Only a minority mentioned an increased workload or the presence of minor risks, which, however, can be easily avoided by using safe models appropriate for the environment and the horse's individual profile.



5.3.

CONCENTRATES (FEEDS, GRAINS)

- Should be used as a **supplement**, and never as the base of the diet;
- Avoid feeding concentrates close to exercise times — **maintain a minimum interval** of 60 minutes before or after work
- Divide the concentrate into at least **2 to 3 meals per day and never exceed 2 kg per meal.**



*A **concentrate-rich** and **forage-deficient diet** may negatively affect health, potentially causing digestive disorders.*



5.4.

WATER

- Water should always be **clean, fresh, and available ad libitum**;
- Ideally, well-positioned automatic waterers **are recommended** (in stables and paddocks).
- **Frequent cleaning** of waterers is essential to prevent contamination.



*An adult horse consumes between
30 to 45 liters of water per day,
varying with temperature, exercise,
and type of feed.*



5.5.

MINERAL SALT

- It must be specific for horses — **never use mineral salt intended for cattle** (as it may contain toxic elements)
- Provide **separately from the feed** for better intake control;
- Supplementation should be offered in ready-to-use formulations, always with **free access to water**;
- It should contain **macro and microelements** essential for bone formation, joints, muscles, and metabolism.





HEALTH



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Chapter 6.

PRACTICES FOR GOOD HEALTH

Ensuring good health in horses is one of the pillars of responsible daily management. A horse's health depends not only on the absence of disease, but also on active prevention, continuous monitoring, and the ability to respond early to signs of discomfort or behavioral changes.

This chapter presents a set of **practical recommendations aimed at promoting and maintaining the physical and physiological health** of horses, addressing topics such as sanitary control, regular clinical assessment, responsible medication use, and other essential care practices.



6.1.

SANITARY CONTROL

- A **vaccination program** should be defined under the guidance of a veterinarian — in Portugal, vaccination against tetanus and equine influenza is recommended;
- Establish an **internal and external deworming program** based on veterinary advice, including regular fecal exams and the use of appropriate products to control worms, ticks, and flies;
- Apply **quarantine measures and conduct clinical evaluations** for animals newly arrived from other locations before contact with other horses;
- Comply with sanitary requirements for international travel and competitions — **follow FEI (Fédération Équestre Internationale) protocols.**



6.2.

CLINICAL ASSESSMENT

- Ensure regular **veterinary check-ups**, ideally monthly, or whenever changes in the animal's behavior or performance are observed;
- Ensure **periodic dental evaluations** (at least once a year) by a veterinarian qualified in equine dentistry;
- Ensure **daily hoof cleaning** to remove dirt, stones, and debris that may cause injuries;
- **Hooves should be trimmed regularly** — every 4 to 8 weeks — by a qualified professional, taking into account factors such as age, type of work performed by the animal, and whether or not it is shod.



6.3.

USE OF MEDICATIONS

- Always follow the **prescription of a veterinarian**, respecting dosage, treatment duration, and routes of administration;
- Check and respect the **expiration dates** of medications, discarding any products that are expired or poorly preserved;
- Ensure **proper storage** in a clean, dry, ventilated area protected from light and heat, such as a cabinet or refrigerator, depending on the type of medication;
- Keep an **individual medication record** for each animal, including date, product name, dosage, route of administration, responsible veterinarian, and relevant clinical observations.



6.4.

ANTI-DOPING CONTROL

- For competition or sport horses, compliance with the regulations of the **FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale)** and the relevant national authorities is mandatory;
- Regularly consult the **Equine Prohibited Substances List**, published by the FEI, which specifies substances banned in competition.¹⁰



*For a better understanding of this topic, see below for **important information** you should be aware of.*

¹⁰Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), FEI Clean Sport Prohibited Substances Database. 2025. Available at: <https://inside.fei.org/fei/cleansport/horses>



DOPING CONTROL: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Before medicating, get informed!

If you participate in, follow, or work with horses in a competitive context, it is essential to understand the importance of doping control — a measure designed not only to ensure fairness in competition but, above all, to protect the health and welfare of the horses.

But what exactly is doping in horses?

In equestrian sports, doping refers to the administration of prohibited substances or methods that artificially enhance the horse's performance or mask signs of pain and injury, putting the animal at risk.

The **Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI)** is the body responsible for regulating and overseeing the use of substances in international competitions.





Through an up-to-date list, the FEI clearly defines **which substances are prohibited and controlled**, also providing essential guidance to riders, grooms, veterinarians, and other support professionals, with the aim of ensuring the integrity of equestrian sport alongside the welfare of the horses.

Access the FEI portal **via the QR code** to consult the official list and other documents on this topic. 



The misuse of substances can have serious consequences:

- It puts the horse's health at risk by preventing it from showing signs of pain or fatigue;
- It increases the likelihood of severe injuries due to excessive strain;
- It compromises the integrity of the sport, affecting fairness among participants;
- And in many cases, it results in sanctions for riders, trainers, and owners.

On the other hand, doping control is a true ally of the horse:

- It helps prevent abuse;
- It promotes responsible management;
- It values the horse's natural performance;
- It reinforces the ethical commitment to the animal.

In short: respecting anti-doping rules means respecting the horse. And in equestrian sports, there is no true merit without care, transparency, and responsibility.



6.5.

USE OF EQUIPMENT

- Select equipment **compatible with the horse's morphology and function**;
- Regularly check the **saddle fit**, as the horse's body changes over time. Whenever possible, consult a professional specialised in saddle fitting to ensure the ideal adjustment;
- The bit should be chosen according to the horse's characteristics and function, and **adjusted anatomically**, taking into account its sensitivity;
- Choose **high-quality, durable materials that are clean and in good condition**, avoiding worn, torn, or deformed items that may cause pain or injury.



-
- Adjust each piece correctly, **without excessive tightness or looseness**, ensuring comfort and safety for both horse and rider;
 - Inspect all equipment **before and after use**, checking for wear points, stitching, hardware, and areas that come into contact with the horse's skin;
 - **Clean and maintain the equipment regularly** in a dry, well-ventilated place — especially leather items, which should be conditioned and protected against mould;
 - **Immediately replace any damaged item** that could compromise the horse's well-being or physical integrity;
 - Observe the animal during and after work to detect signs of **discomfort, pain, wounds, or behavioral changes** that may be related to the equipment.





ENVIRONMENT



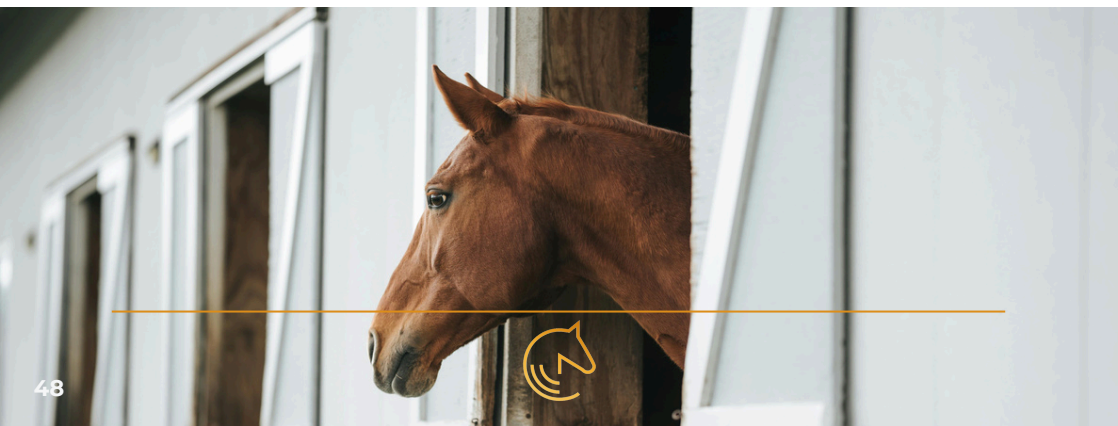
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Chapter 7.

PRACTICES FOR A GOOD ENVIRONMENT

The environment in which horses live has a direct and significant impact on their health, behaviour, and overall well-being. A poorly structured, dirty, uncomfortable, or unsafe space can be a source of stress, disease, and injury, compromising the animals' quality of life.

Ensuring an appropriate, clean, safe, and functional environment is therefore one of the fundamental pillars of good equine management practices. This chapter presents **practical recommendations for the planning, maintenance, and improvement** of the spaces where horses live, move, and rest.



7.1.

FACILITIES

- It is recommended that individual stalls measure 4 m x 4 m, or at minimum 4 m x 3 m, providing **comfort and mobility** for the horse;
- Doors should preferably be between 2.20 m and 3 m in height and 1.20 m to 1.40 m in width, **to allow safe entry and exit** for the animal;
- The construction materials used in the facilities **must be safe**, avoiding slippery surfaces, sharp edges, protruding nails, or any elements that may pose a risk.



-
- Paddocks should be spacious, with well-drained and level ground, **allowing the horse to move freely** without risk of accidents;
 - Fencing must be secure, with no loose or sharp parts, and **built with appropriate materials** such as wood or low-voltage electric tape to prevent injuries;
 - Provide **shaded and sheltered areas** in paddocks or pastures, using natural structures (trees) or artificial ones (fixed or mobile shelters);
 - It is essential to ensure that outdoor areas **have accessible and appropriate waterers and feeders.**



7.2.

HYGIENE AND SANITATION

- Perform **daily cleaning** of stable bedding, removing manure and leftover food.
- **Regularly replace** the stable bedding to ensure comfort and prevent infections;
- Disinfect the area periodically using appropriate products, **respecting the required contact time** before the animal returns;
- Ensure the proper disposal of waste (manure) through **sustainable practices**, such as composting;
- Implement a **pest control plan**, with special attention to the prevention and management of rodents, flies, and other disease vectors.



7.3.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

- Adapt the environment to climatic conditions to **ensure thermal comfort** and prevent stress;
- Ensure that stables are well ventilated, with openings **that promote air renewal**;
- **Avoid prolonged confinement** in closed, poorly ventilated, or humid spaces, which encourage respiratory diseases;
- Whenever possible, **allow horses to spend part of the day in outdoor areas** (paddocks or pasture).



SPACE MAKES A DIFFERENCE!

Find out why.

Did you know that the **type of environment** in which horses live can directly influence the **health of their hooves**?

An experimental study¹¹ conducted in Brazil evaluated hoof growth in horses kept under **three different management systems**:

- intensive system: horses remain confined in stalls with limited movement;
- Semi-intensive system: horses alternate between time in stalls and access to paddocks or outdoor areas for a few hours each day;
- Extensive system: horses are kept in pastures most of the time, with ample freedom of movement.

¹¹Silva Filho et al. *Evaluation of the influence of management systems on hoof growth in horses*. In: II Academic Activities Exhibition – UNISO, Proceedings. (2.: 2016 : 292-296) 2017.



The results showed that horses kept in **environments with greater freedom of movement (semi-intensive and extensive systems) exhibited significantly higher hoof growth compared to confined horses**. This is believed to be directly related to the natural stimulation of blood circulation and overall locomotor health.

This finding reinforces the importance of allowing natural movement for horses — one of the good practices recommended in this guide — whenever possible, through daily access to outdoor areas such as paddocks or pastures.



ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF GOOD PRACTICES

The implementation of good practices in the care and management of horses is not only an ethical obligation — **it is also an economically effective strategy**. Consistently applying measures that improve animal welfare can have a positive impact on productivity, value, and the economic sustainability of the entire equine sector.

When appropriate practices in feeding, health, environment, and behaviour are adopted, the benefits go beyond improving the horses' quality of life. Well-managed animals tend to have a lower incidence of preventable diseases — such as digestive issues — which in turn helps **reduce veterinary treatment costs and recovery time**.



A concrete example is the use of slow feeders, a practice already mentioned throughout this guide. These devices, besides promoting the natural behaviour of horses, **can help reduce hay waste by up to 50%**, resulting in significant savings in feeding costs.

Good practices can also contribute to **greater operational efficiency and risk reduction** by valuing labour, preventing legal sanctions, and improving institutional image. Equestrian establishments that apply clear welfare protocols tend to retain more clients and attract public and private support, strengthening their market position.

Thus, we can consider that investing in good practices is investing in a more ethical, competitive, and sustainable sector. The horse economy increasingly depends on how we treat the horses.



FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This **Good Practices Guide**, promoted by the **Horse Economic Forum**, represents a concrete contribution to strengthening and enhancing the equestrian sector, both in Portugal and internationally.

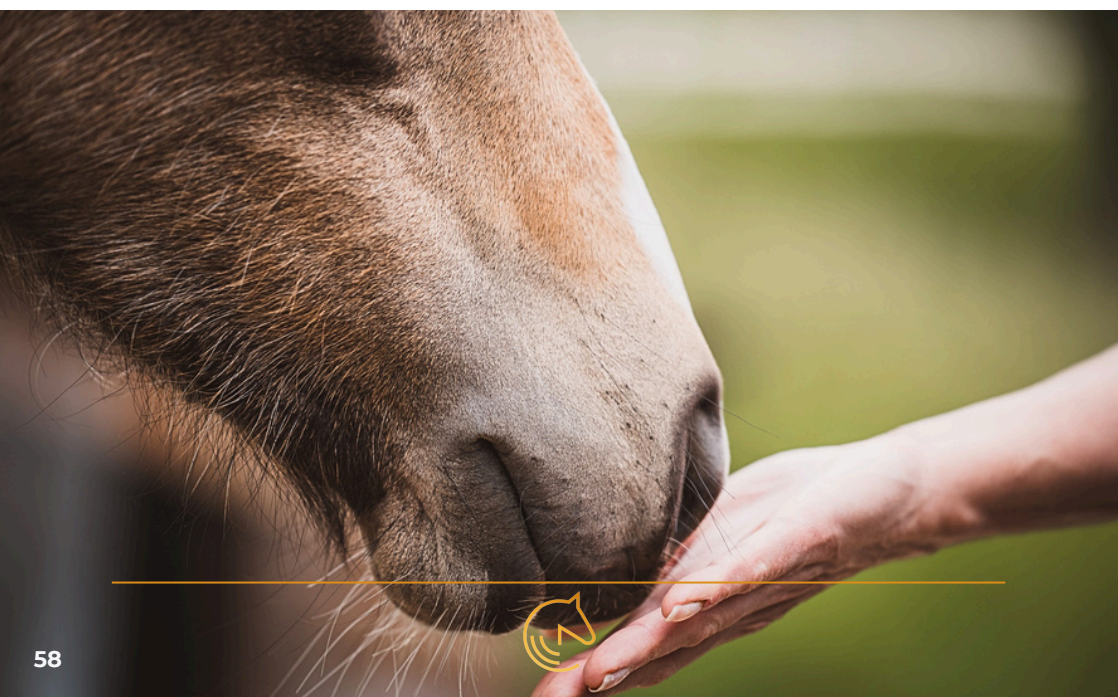
More than just a set of technical recommendations, this document reaffirms a collective commitment to promoting animal welfare, human responsibility, and economic sustainability.

By bringing together scientific knowledge, field experiences, and accessible guidelines, the guide aims to support all professionals, breeders, practitioners, caregivers, and horse enthusiasts, encouraging the adoption of more ethical, efficient, and conscious practices.



The horse today is much more than a working, competition, tourism, or leisure animal. **It is a significant economic asset and a living cultural heritage.** By taking better care of horses, we also care for the future of equestrian activities and social development.

We believe that a strong equine economy is possible — through greater innovation and a closer connection to the values of our society. May this guide inspire continuous improvements, guide decisions, and contribute practically to a more dignified and sustainable sector.



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