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CASTRATION

Castration is removal of the testicles of a male horse. In other words, it is turning a colt into a gelding. The vast majority of male horses are castrated. If you own a colt or stallion, you may have some questions.



Why Castrate?

Intact male horses are pretty easy to handle when young, but as they pass through puberty and hormones become an important part of their life, their behavior changes. They tend to be more aggressive and pushy, they are distracted easily by the sight of other horses (male or female), and they vocalize much more and develop “coltish” behavior such as biting and striking. As they mature more, their sexual interest in mares becomes more intense, as does their aggression toward other males. Stallions usually have to live apart from other horses for their entire lives. You need separate stalls and paddocks to keep them away from your other animals. Their natural instinct is to breed the females and fight the males.

While there are perfectly well-behaved stallions showing and competing, they take much more work and effort than a gelding to keep them mannered.

When is the best time to castrate?

The testicles on a colt are normally present at birth. There is no need to wait for them to “drop”. Most colts are castrated in the fall of their yearling year, although they can be done earlier or later. Usually, early is better. The testicles are smaller and the blood vessels in the area less developed so a smaller incision is used and there is less bleeding and swelling afterwards. The surgery site heals faster and there is less discomfort. Castrating as a yearling or younger is much easier on the colt. Also, stallion behavior is less developed, so there are less bad habits to break. Some people prefer to wait until a horse is older to castrate so that there is more development of the male body type (larger head and neck, thicker chest and rump). This may be an advantage in some careers, but in general, it is difficult to tell at what age a horse was castrated by looking at him. As a rule of thumb, horses gelded early tend to be a little taller at maturity, and those gelded later, a little wider, but the difference is variable.

Time of year is important. It is important to avoid the middle of summer (because flies will be attracted to the surgery site) and the middle of winter (because extreme cold is hard on the horse during surgery and recovery). Early spring or late fall, outside of fly season and rainy season, is best.

How is a castration performed?

There are two methods of castration. A closed surgical castration occurs on a surgery table under absolute sterile conditions and the surgery site is completely sewn closed. This method has the least chance of infection and healing is much faster, but requires transporting the horse to a surgical facility and is several times more expensive than the second method. The second method, the open method, is performed at your farm, either in the stall or on a flat, grassy area outside. After the surgery, the incision is left open to drain. Because it is open, there is more aftercare involved, but not much. There typically is more swelling than with a closed castration, but it is faster and less expensive than a closed castration. Most horses are castrated by the open method.

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Both methods are performed under general anesthesia. The colt is given a general examination to assure that he is healthy enough to withstand the procedure and that both testicles are descended. A tetanus booster is given if he is not current on that vaccination. He is then given drugs to induce unconsciousness and to lay him down. The surgical area is cleaned and scrubbed, and local anesthesia is performed. After the surgery, the horse is allowed to lie quietly until he is awake enough to rise. With an open castration, surgery usually takes 10-15 minutes and recovery another 10-15 minutes. Surgery and recovery time is longer in a closed castration.

At Keenan McAlister Equine, we only perform open castrations. After the surgery, the horse will stay in the stall for 24 hours and observed closely for any complications such as bleeding. After the 24 hours, he is turned out for exercise and resumes pretty much his normal life. A long acting antibiotic and a pain killer are given at the time of surgery. Additional drugs for pain are dispensed. Horses generally don't show any signs of pain or stiffness after surgery. There will be a small amount of drainage from the wound and swelling of the sheath, especially if the horse is older when gelded. The best treatment for the swelling is exercise.

What can I expect after castration?

The horse will be completely healed from the surgery within 2-3 weeks, although you will be treating him normally long before that. Training or riding can resume the day after surgery. Any stallion-like behavior that has developed will take weeks to months to disappear. Much stallion personality is learned, so the older he is at the time of surgery (the more behavior he has learned), the longer it will take him to calm down. Some older stallions never do become as calm as horses gelded earlier, especially if they were used for breeding.

As the saying goes, there are too many stallions in the world. All of our horses are special, but unless yours is exceptional enough to enter a breeding program, both you and he will be happier if he is a gelding. He can live a more normal life among his herd mates, without all the fighting and romantic escapades of the stallion life, and you will have a calmer and less distracted horse.