

A vet will examine your prospective new horse carefully, including listening to his heart



Ready, set, vet!

Buying a horse is hugely exciting, but it's also a step into the unknown, so find out more by investing in a full vetting. Vet Stuart Thorne explains what's involved in this vital process



OUR EXPERT

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If you've found a horse you're keen to buy it can be tempting to jump straight in and seal the deal, but before any money changes hands it's important to have a vet give him a once-over on your behalf.

The aim of a vetting, more correctly known as a pre-purchase examination or PPE, is to give a potential purchaser information on any veterinary factors that could mean the horse isn't suitable for his intended use. This thorough clinical examination aims to identify and assess any such factors by looking at the horse's health and conformation to try and make sure he'll be capable of the work you want him to do. The end result is a certificate presented to you detailing the vet's findings. If you're a first-time buyer or have never had a horse vetted before purchase it can seem a bit daunting or unnecessary, but once you understand everything that goes into a vetting, and why, the value of this process becomes clear.

The outcome of a vetting

It might seem strange to jump straight to the end result of the PPE process, but by understanding what you'll end up with it's easier to see why vets do what they do during a vetting. The final certificate is a report of the vet's findings, including all significant signs of disease, injury or physical abnormality. Each PPE is performed on behalf of a specific prospective purchaser so the vet's final opinion is based on your individual needs and intended use of the horse. The opinion of the examining vet is given in the following format:

"In my opinion, on the balance of probabilities, the conditions reported above do/do not prejudice this horse's suitability for purchase to be used for ..."

If the vet feels their findings do prejudice the horse's suitability for a specific role, for example as a four-star eventer, then they will delete the relevant section and the horse is often then referred to as 'failing the vet'. This term can be very misleading, however, as the same horse could be examined by the same vet on the same day for someone who only wants a quiet hack and would 'pass', as the findings don't prejudice his suitability for this intended use.

Although the outcome is important, it's more useful to move away from this 'pass or fail' mindset. While the PPE provides an assessment to help you make an informed decision as to whether you should continue with purchasing the horse, it's an assessment only of the horse at the time of examination and isn't a guarantee of his suitability for your intended purpose. It is, however, an important part of the risk assessment you undertake when considering buying a horse, and it's also often a requirement of insurance companies for more expensive horses.

Before the vetting

Before a PPE, the vet must find out whether the person selling the horse is a client of their practice. When a vet does a PPE on a client's horse it's standard procedure for the seller to agree to full disclosure of previous

A vetting will provide you with a certificate detailing the vet's findings



clinical history held by the practice. If this isn't possible for any reason then the vet should say they can't do the examination as it's important there's no conflict of interest. The vet must act wholly in the interests of the person looking to buy the horse.

The PPE certificate will record whether the seller (or anyone acting on their behalf) is a client of the examining vet or their practice, if the vet or anyone from their practice has attended the horse and, if they have, an opinion is given on the significance of any veterinary history, such as previous injuries or illnesses. This means you'll often get more information about the horse by instructing the seller's own vet, rather than a vet with no previous knowledge of the horse.

To mitigate against this, if I'm examining a horse for a non client I ask for a signed declaration to standardised questions including duration of ownership, whether

the horse is currently in work, if he's received recent medication, details about his medical and surgical history, any lameness, whether he has any 'vices' or behavioural abnormalities, the type of bedding used, his feed and how he's kept.

The five-stage examination

Most vettings are what's called five-stage clinical examinations, which involve a vet looking at the horse in-hand, under saddle and after exercise. In some circumstances, a potential buyer may request a less detailed two-stage examination, but if you do this you must be aware and confirm in writing that you understand the examination will be limited in its scope and may not detect important issues that could influence whether you decide to buy the horse or not.

Now you know what a PPE entails, turn over for an explanation of the five stages.



You'll often learn more if the examining vet has prior knowledge of the horse - which could help you seal the deal!

Presenting your horse for a vetting

If you're a seller putting your horse forward for vetting, you will need to provide the following for a full examination to take place:

- 1 A clean and tidy horse.** Avoid using hoof oil, though, as it doesn't help in the examination of the feet.
- 2 A stable that can be darkened.** This is needed for the examination of the horse's eyes.
- 3 A flat, level surface** on which to stand the horse square.
- 4 A firm area to lunge.** It needs to be large enough for a small circle at trot.
- 5 An area, paddock or school** to exercise the horse under saddle.



A PPE will start with a visual examination of your prospective new mount

STAGE 1

Preliminary examination

This is a thorough external examination of the horse at rest using visual observation, palpation (touch) 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 (listening) of the horse's heart and lungs at rest.

It does not include an examination of the inside of the horse's sheath, a detailed mouth examination with a speculum, a height measurement or any examination for pregnancy.

Flexion tests don't have to be included in a PPE, but most vets will perform them



STAGE 2

Walk and trot in-hand

Here the horse 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 also be carried out, but these aren't mandatory parts of the standard procedure and there may be circumstances when the examining veterinary surgeon concludes that it's unsafe, inappropriate, unsuitable or impossible to perform them. However, most purchasers expect them to be performed as they can provide useful additional information about a horse. The PPE certificate records whether or not they were done and, if not, the reason for omitting them.

STAGE 3

The exercise phase

In this phase the horse is usually ridden and given sufficient exercise to allow assessment when he has an increased breathing effort and heart rate. This tends to include assessment of his gait at walk, trot, canter and, if appropriate, gallop, and finally for the purpose for which he's being purchased. If ridden exercise isn't possible for any reason then this stage may be conducted by exercising the horse on the lunge, but this fact should be made clear to the purchaser and on the certificate.



An examination of the horse during ridden work is especially important

STAGE 4

Period of rest and re-examination

The horse is allowed to stand quietly for a period during which time his respiratory and cardiovascular systems are monitored as they return to resting levels.

STAGE 5

Second trot-up

Finally the horse is trotted in-hand again to look for any signs of strains or injuries shown up by the exercise and rest stages. Once the PPE has been completed, the vet may report their findings and opinion to you verbally at the time or soon afterwards, as well as documenting them in a certificate that's issued to you as the purchaser. If the purchase doesn't go ahead a certificate may not be completed, unless you require one. Certificates are not transferable to another purchaser - each vetting is unique to each potential buyer.

Other elements of the PPE

Vets also recommend a blood sample is taken for testing or storage (usually for six months) to allow for the detection of any substances in the horse's system when he was examined which could have masked factors affecting his suitability for your intended use. This enables you to buy in confidence knowing the horse hasn't received sedatives, steroids or painkillers at the time of the examination. It also protects the seller who can prove, if required, that the horse wasn't 'doped' at the time if, for example, he becomes lame soon after purchase through no fault of their own, or if you are not able to cope with your new horse and claim he must have been sedated for the examination. If a blood sample isn't taken, the reason is noted on the certificate.

Another element is the identification of the horse by recording his markings on a diagram, writing a description, searching for a microchip and looking at any documents relating to him. The diagram may be left out if a microchip is confirmed by a scanner and the diagram in the horse's passport matches his appearance. If this is the case, both microchip and passport numbers should be recorded on the PPE certificate.

If more information is needed

In some circumstances, the vet or potential purchaser may require additional information, so further specialised diagnostics techniques may be used. These may include ultrasound scans, radiographs or endoscopic evaluation. If the horse is going to be insured, the insurance company will often require certain radiographs to be taken. This means it's important you contact your insurer before the examination to check which radiographic views are needed.

Variations on examinations

Although there's a recognised format for the PPE, there may be practical or clinical reasons why the examining vet needs to vary it. When it's not possible or appropriate to complete all the stages, or where it is limited to stages one and two at the request of the purchaser, the variations should be made clear to you and on the certificate. In these



The horse will be scanned and his microchip number recorded



Taking blood samples will protect both seller and buyer

cases, the opinion given is based purely on those parts of the examination that were completed, meaning conditions that could have been detected by the stages left out will not be identified.

The results of any additional procedures (e.g. radiography or endoscopy) carried out at your request should also be reported and recorded on the certificate or in an addendum to it.

Limitations of the PPE

While the PPE is a detailed process it can never be completely exhaustive, and it's important to understand what it's not able to cover. The first issue is ownership, and while

the certificate identifies the horse that was examined, the vet isn't responsible for checking the person selling the horse has legal title in him. You as the buyer should always make sure you're confident about the ownership of the horse and verify any microchip details with the relevant database.

Another thing the PPE can't confirm is age - in fact, without paper records from foalhood it's not possible to confirm a horse's age accurately. Estimates based on a horse's teeth are imprecise, so exact ageing using dentition alone should be avoided. Without documentary evidence, the term 'aged' may be used to refer to a horse considered, after examination, to be over 15 years of age.

Finally, any warranty regarding the horse is a matter between seller and purchaser - it's not the responsibility of the examining vet. When you're buying a horse it's worth considering whether you can get a written warranty from the seller covering matters such as the horse's medical or surgical history, height, freedom from stereotypical behaviours or 'vices', temperament, non-administration of drugs prior to the examination and the horse's previous or existing uses and performance levels. 🐾



Although the vet will look at a horse's teeth, accurate ageing via dentition isn't possible



Incomplete examinations must be made clear to the purchaser and recorded on the PPE certificate