



# Pre-Purchase Examinations

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**P**re-purchase veterinary examinations (PPEs) or 'vettings' are a standardised and comprehensive examination of a horse by a veterinary surgeon.

PPEs have evolved over the years and are designed to enable a prospective purchaser to make an informed decision about a horse's suitability for the job they want it to do. The gold standard is a full 5 stage PPE, however, in a few select instances, a limited 2 stage PPE may be more appropriate - for example in a young un-backed horse, or a heavily pregnant mare. There may be insurance implications associated with the limited PPE. (See box).

**The full 5 stage examination comprises:**

## STAGE 1

### Preliminary Examination

This is a methodical examination of the horse, which includes an assessment of his

general appearance, conformation and condition.

The passport must always be made available at the time of the PPE so that the horse's identity can be verified from the markings and the vaccination status established. The microchip is usually scanned to confirm identity where there is

one (all horses born since July 2009 should have a microchip).

An oral examination includes evaluation of the incisor teeth which helps to confirm age (although this is not an exact science), identifies the presence of wolf teeth and may reveal sharp enamel points on the first upper cheek teeth, which may indicate that

dentinal attention is required.

The eyes are examined using a pen torch and ophthalmoscope to reveal any abnormalities or signs of disease. The ophthalmoscope is a very useful piece of equipment that allows us to examine every part of the eye.

The resting heart is assessed with a



Where a horse or pony is microchipped, this is usually scanned to confirm identity



Eyes are examined with an ophthalmoscope to check for any abnormalities or signs of disease.

stethoscope. By listening to the heart on both sides of the chest we can hear all the heart valves and any evidence of murmurs (which indicates abnormal blood flow) or abnormal rhythms that may affect the horse's ability to work.

The skin is examined and any masses such as melanomas (common in greys) and sarcoids are noted. In many cases, such conditions will not be reason enough to 'fail' a horse but should still be recorded; for example, sarcoids may not cause a problem if they are located where they will not interfere with tack.

## STAGE 2

### Trotting up

The horse is walked and then trotted in a straight line on a hard, level surface to detect abnormalities in his gait or action. Flexion tests may be performed at this stage of the examination, but not in all cases. Each limb is flexed for 45-60 seconds before trotting the horse away. This is a means of applying stress to the various soft tissue and bony components of the musculoskeletal system and, where a pre-existing problem is present, this additional stress may manifest itself as lameness during the trot up. The test is non-diagnostic; it is not the job of the examining vet to pinpoint the cause of the problem, only to assist in the prospective purchaser's decision making.

Trotting the horse on a small diameter circle on a firm surface may also be required and will be performed only where a suitable surface is available, it is safe to do so (i.e. not wet or slippery) and the horse's temperament permits it. This is a fairly demanding test for any horse and may show up a lameness that was not obvious on the straight-line trot up.

A 2 stage PPE is concluded at this point.



Flexion tests may be performed on all four limbs to help identify if a pre-existing problem is present

## STAGE 3

### Strenuous exercise

The horse is tacked-up and subject to strenuous ridden exercise. The aim is to make the horse breathe rapidly and deeply so that any abnormal respiratory noises can be detected, to increase the demand on the heart so that cardiac abnormalities are detectable and to tire the horse so that musculoskeletal strains or injuries may either be revealed by lameness during the exercise phase or stiffness or lameness after the rest period (stage 4). Immature or unfit horses are likely to tire more quickly than fit horses and this is reflected in the time taken to conduct this stage of the PPE. Sometimes the rider tires before the horse!

## STAGE 4

### Rest period

The horse is rested for a short period after exercise during which the heart and breathing are monitored as they return to their resting levels. The recovery rate will depend on the horse's fitness. Once the horse has recovered, the PPE progresses to the final stage.

## STAGE 5

### 2nd Trot up

The horse is walked and trotted again in straight lines, turned sharply and backed up, in order to reveal any abnormalities made worse by the strenuous exercise stage. Occasionally, the flexion tests are repeated at this stage.

## Insurance considerations

Some insurance companies insist on a PPE and some may insist on a 5 stage rather than a limited 2 stage PPE.

The purchase price and/or level of 'loss of use' cover may influence this requirement. Horses over a certain value may require additional tests (e.g. x rays, endoscopy) as part of the PPE.

Abnormalities noted on the PPE report may be excluded from future claims. Where possible the purchaser should confirm that they are able to obtain suitable insurance cover before the purchase is made.



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## Blood testing

A blood sample taken at the end of the PPE is stored for 6 months. This can be tested for drugs (sedatives, pain killers and steroids) if the horse subsequently develops problems, which may have been masked by medication.

## Temperament

Temperament, although somewhat subjective, is usually evident after such an extensive and mildly intrusive examination and can provide a useful indication of a horse's suitability as, for example, a child's pony.

## Additional tests

General blood screening tests, x-rays, pregnancy testing, examination of the genitalia and for breeding soundness, height measurements and a comprehensive oral examination using a full mouth speculum (gag) are not part of the routine 5 stage PPE but can be undertaken at the purchaser's request and at additional cost. More invasive examinations may necessitate sedation and will obviously require the vendor's permission.

## Report

At the end of the PPE, the purchaser is provided with a written report. This details the abnormalities, if any, that have been noted. It is important to remember that any PPE and its outcome are specific to the horse and the requirements of the purchaser; there is no 'pass' or 'fail'. The vet will determine whether the horse is suitable for the job he will be expected to do and will note any concerns: the decision to buy the horse always lies with the purchaser.

## Vet profile



**Name:** Mark Grant  
**Qualifications:** MA VetMB BSc PhD CertAVP(ED) BAEDT MRCVS RCVS Advanced Veterinary Practitioner in Equine Dentistry; BAEDT practical examiner.

**Year of qualification:** Cambridge 1997

**Main interests:** Mark is responsible for the sport and leisure horse clients at RosSDales. He spends most of his time providing a comprehensive range of equine ambulatory services including lameness evaluation, non-TB stud work, etc. He enjoys all aspects of veterinary practice but his special interests are internal medicine, ophthalmology and dentistry. In addition to a large routine dental caseload, Mark also spends some of his time at RosSDales Equine Hospital where he sees dental referrals (for tooth extractions, restorations and endodontics).

## Seller's Warranty

The prospective purchaser should consider obtaining a warranty from the seller with respect to vices, height, previous conditions or surgery or other significant information before purchasing the horse. A seller's warranty is a matter between seller and purchaser and is not the responsibility of the examining vet.