

Gelding a colt – why, when and where should it happen?

By Matt Hanks, BVSc MRCVS of Central Equine Vets

Why castrate your colt?

Castrating a colt is usually performed for ease of management. Left entire, colts can become difficult to manage as it can be difficult for them to safely fit into a herd of mares or geldings as they may fight with other male horses in the herd in an attempt to establish herd dominance.

With mares, there is the risk of the colt mating with them, leading to unexpected and unwanted pregnancies.

As colts get older and approach sexual maturity, they often become increasingly difficult for owners to handle, with some becoming very dangerous.

At what age should castration happen?

Colts can be castrated at any age. It is our preference to perform the castration when



Gelding with post operative swelling after being castrated



Open castration of a horse performed in the field under general

the colt is between 6-18 months old. This is because we feel that the younger the colt is when castrated, the fewer problems there are.

Generally, younger colt foals recover faster from the operation and have fewer post-operative complications - most likely because their testicles and associated blood vessels are much smaller when the foal is younger which means less bleeding during surgery and therefore less post-operative swelling and a reduced chance of post-operative infection.

Where should it happen?

Generally, it is best to have the colt castrated at home if your premises allow as it is less stressful for them. Most practices castrate colts under a general anaesthetic, although some prefer to perform castrations with the colt heavily sedated, and local anaesthetic injected into each testicle.

At Central Equine Vets, we perform our castrations under a full general anaesthetic because we feel it affords more surgical control, hopefully helping to minimise postoperative problems. Consequently, castrations are best performed in a clean, flat, dry field or in an outdoor or indoor school, as long as the surface is not too dusty. Performing castrations in stables is generally to be avoided as, upon recovery from the general anaesthetic, there is a risk that the horse may injure itself on walls etc.

Colts with undescended testicles are referred to as 'rigs.' These

undescended testicles may be present in the inguinal canal (groin) or within the abdomen. Rigs are generally best castrated in the hospital environment because the surgery takes longer and can be more demanding, especially if the testicle is located within the abdomen.

Colts with a history of scrotal hernias are best treated in the hospital environment, because they need to have the castration and hernia repaired at the same time.

How long does the procedure take?

Once anaesthetised, the surgery is relatively quick, generally taking around 15 minutes. After surgery, the foal is allowed to recover naturally. Recovery times vary: generally, too quick a recovery is undesirable because the gelding may try to get up before it has had time to completely regain its senses and balance. Fortunately, the modern anaesthetic drugs used these days usually allow for a smooth recovery in the field.

The surgical procedure

Field castrations for colts up to around 24 months old are generally performed using a technique called an 'open' castration. Two incisions are made in the scrotum (one for each testicle), allowing the testicle to be completely exteriorised. The blood vessels and spermatic cord are then crushed using a surgical instrument called an emasculator. With an open castration, no sutures (stitches) are used, with the wound being allowed to drain naturally.

For older colts or stallions, a closed castration is preferable. This technique involves using sutures in order to seal off the blood vessels supplying the testicles and it also seals off the vaginal tunic covering the testicle. This should minimise the risk of post-operative herniation, which can be a significant risk in larger, older horses. However, this procedure takes longer and ideally needs to be performed in a sterile operating theatre which makes it more expensive.

What possible complications can occur?

Generally, castrated horses suffer few post-operative complications. However, if complications are experienced, they tend to be one of the following:

- Post-operative haemorrhage
- Scrotal and sheath swelling through infection or bruising
- Intestinal herniation through the scrotal incisions
- Injury as a result of a poor recovery post-anaesthetic

Prior to surgery, we will discuss the likelihood of these risks occurring with you, how you should monitor your horse and what you should do should they occur. If in any doubt about a post-operative complication, get in touch with your vet.



Central Equine Veterinary Services Ltd

Edinburgh: 0131 664 5606

Kinross: 01577 863333

info@centralequinevets.co.uk - www.centralequinevets.co.uk

