

Health & Safety Factsheet No. 7



EMPLOYEE WELLBEING GUIDANCE FOR THOROUGHBRED BREEDERS (UK)

Stud farms and breeding yards involve physically demanding, repetitive, and sometimes stressful work. Promoting the mental and physical health of staff not only benefits employees but also supports animal welfare, business performance, and compliance with UK health and safety legislation.

Legal and moral responsibilities

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, employers in the UK have a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety, and welfare of their employees. This includes both physical and mental wellbeing.

Employers must also comply with the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, which require the assessment of risks to employees' health and implementation of appropriate preventive and protective measures.

The horse breeding industry is physically demanding, and staff face a range of challenges that can affect their health, safety, and overall well-being. Understanding these challenges is crucial for breeders to implement effective risk management and promote a safe working environment.

Physical wellbeing

Physical wellbeing is particularly relevant in breeding operations, where tasks can be physically demanding, including handling horses, lifting and moving feed and bedding, mucking out, and working outdoors in all weather conditions. These include:

- **Manual handling:** Handling feed, bedding, hay bales, mucking out stables, and moving equipment are routine tasks. These can lead to musculoskeletal injuries, particularly when loads are heavy, awkward, or repetitive.
- **Handling horses and foals:** Staff are exposed to the risk of kicks, bites, and crushing injuries. Foals and young horses can be unpredictable, increasing the likelihood of accidents.
- **Environmental factors:** Working outdoors exposes staff to weather extremes, including heat, cold, rain, and wind. Uneven, slippery, or muddy surfaces increase the risk of slips, trips, and falls.
- **Repetitive tasks:** Daily routines such as grooming, mucking out, feeding, and tacking up can lead to repetitive strain injuries if not managed properly.
- **Seasonal peaks:** The breeding calendar includes intense periods, particularly during the foaling season, which often requires night work and long shifts. Fatigue and physical stress increase the risk of accidents and injuries.
- **Stress and physical strain:** The combination of physical exertion and high-pressure situations, such as foaling complications or managing sick horses, can exacerbate physical strain and impact overall wellbeing.

Mitigation strategies

- Use mechanical aids and team lifting to reduce manual handling risks.
- Train staff in safe horse handling techniques.
- Maintain stable floors and walkways to prevent slips and falls.
- Monitor workloads and rotate tasks where possible to reduce repetitive strain.
- Schedule breaks, rotate tasks, and manage workloads to reduce fatigue.
- Provide appropriate PPE, including gloves, boots, and protective clothing.
- Encourage reporting of discomfort or early injuries for timely intervention.
- Promote healthy lifestyle choices, including hydration and nutrition, especially during hot or physically demanding conditions.

The horse breeding industry presents unique physical challenges due to manual handling, working with animals, environmental conditions, repetitive tasks, and seasonal workload peaks. By recognising these risks and implementing practical strategies, breeders can improve staff safety, reduce injuries, and maintain both human and animal welfare.

Mental wellbeing

The horse breeding industry is not only physically demanding but also mentally challenging. Staff face high-pressure situations, long hours, and emotional stress that can impact mental wellbeing. Recognising these challenges is essential for promoting a healthy, safe, and sustainable working environment. These include:

- **Stress and pressure:** Foaling season, breeding schedules, and peak workloads create high-pressure environments. Emergency situations, such as foaling complications or sick horses, can be stressful and emotionally taxing.
- **Long hours and shift work:** Night shifts, early mornings, and extended hours are common, particularly during foaling. Disrupted sleep and fatigue contribute to reduced mental resilience and increased stress.
- **Emotional attachment and loss:** Staff often form strong bonds with horses and foals. Injuries, illness, or loss of animals can lead to grief and emotional strain.
- **Isolation and rural working conditions:** Breeding farms are frequently in rural locations, limiting social interaction and support networks. Staff may experience feelings of isolation or loneliness.
- **High responsibility:** Staff are responsible for the welfare of valuable and vulnerable animals. Mistakes or accidents can have serious consequences, adding to pressure and anxiety.
- **Physical-mental interaction:** Physical fatigue from manual handling and long hours can exacerbate mental strain. Mental stress can reduce concentration, increasing the risk of accidents.

Mitigation strategies

- Conduct an organisational stress risk assessment.
- Promote open communication and a supportive workplace culture.
- Provide access to mental health resources, counselling, or employee assistance programs.
- Encourage regular breaks, rest, and sleep during intense periods.
- Implement team support and supervision to reduce feelings of isolation.
- Recognise and reward staff contributions, fostering a positive working environment.
- Train staff to identify the signs of stress, burnout, and emotional strain in themselves and colleagues.
- Encourage staff to report concerns about workload or mental health.

Mental well-being in horse breeding is challenged by long hours, high responsibility, emotional strain, and rural isolation. By implementing supportive measures, fostering open communication, and providing access to resources, breeders can help maintain staff mental health, improve workplace morale, and enhance the overall welfare of both employees and horses.

Work-life balance

Where possible, employers should support work-life balance, considering shift patterns, night duties during foaling season, and seasonal peak workloads. Flexible working arrangements, clear scheduling, and adequate rest periods contribute to employee wellbeing and reduce the risk of accidents and errors.

Training, supervision, and communication

Staff should receive regular training on both physical and mental health, including recognising stress, safe handling practices, and workplace safety procedures. Supervisors should actively engage with employees, providing guidance, feedback, and support.

Clear communication channels allow staff to raise concerns or suggestions about health, safety, and wellbeing, contributing to a safer and more productive environment.

Review and continuous improvement

Employee wellbeing should be regularly reviewed as part of the farm's health and safety management. Risk assessments, staff feedback, incident reports, and changing working conditions should inform ongoing improvements to both physical and mental health support.

Useful links

[TBA Mental Health Support](#) (downloadable document from TBA Guidance Hub Employee Handbook)

[Racing Welfare](#)

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