Health & Safety Factsheet No. 8

NOISE AND VIBRATION GUIDANCE FOR THE THOROUGHBRED BREEDING INDUSTRY (UK)

THE THOROUGHBRED BREEDERS' ASSOCIATION

Noise and vibration are common occupational hazards within the equine industry. Sources include machinery, vehicles, equipment, construction or maintenance work, and daily yard activities. If not properly managed, exposure to excessive noise and vibration can affect staff health, safety, communication, and horse welfare.

Legal responsibilities

Under the Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005, employers must protect workers from risks to health and safety arising from noise exposure. This includes assessing noise levels, taking action to reduce exposure where necessary, and providing information, training, and hearing protection.

Exposure to vibration is covered by the Control of Vibration at Work Regulations 2005, which require employers to assess and manage risks from hand-arm vibration (HAV) and whole-body vibration (WBV).

Employers also have general duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety, and welfare of employees.

Common sources of noise and vibration

Typical sources within breeding operations include:

- Tractors, ATVs, loaders, and other vehicles.
- Machinery such as muck spreaders and workshop equipment.
- Maintenance, construction, or repair activities.
- Horse treadmills.
- Vibrating hand-held tools such as yard blowers, yard vacuums, strimmers, chainsaws, power washers and mowers.

Sudden or prolonged loud noise can also startle horses, increasing the risk of accidents.

Health and welfare risks

Excessive noise exposure can lead to hearing damage, tinnitus, fatigue, stress, and reduced communication, increasing the likelihood of accidents. Vibration exposure can cause conditions such as hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS), back pain, and other musculoskeletal disorders.

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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.

Risk assessment and control measures

Breeders should assess noise and vibration risks and take steps to eliminate or reduce exposure, following the hierarchy of control. Measures may include:

- Selecting low-noise and low-vibration equipment where possible.
- Maintaining machinery and vehicles to reduce noise and vibration levels.
- Limiting the duration and frequency of exposure through task rotation and keeping records.
- Planning noisy activities away from stables, foaling areas, and busy periods.
- Providing hearing protection and ensuring it is correctly used when required.

Information, training, and PPE

Staff should receive information and training on noise and vibration risks, safe use of equipment, exposure limits, and the importance of reporting symptoms early. Hearing protection must be suitable, readily available, and worn where required by the risk assessment.

Monitoring and review

Noise and vibration risks should be reviewed regularly, particularly when new equipment is introduced, work practices change, or health concerns are raised. Health surveillance may be required where exposure risks are significant.

Summary

By assessing and controlling noise and vibration risks, breeders can protect staff health, improve communication and safety, and minimise disruption to horses. Effective management supports legal compliance and promotes a safer working environment across breeding operations.

Last reviewed - February 2026