

Equine Pre-purchase Evaluation

No matter how well you know a particular horse, or how reasonable the purchase price may be, it is prudent to have a pre-purchase evaluation performed on any horse you plan to buy. At Mississippi State University, our pre-purchase exam consists of a head-to-tail evaluation of your intended purchase. Each horse is assessed for conformation, general health, and musculoskeletal soundness.

While there is no “perfect horse,” we evaluate a horse’s conformation (the way he or she is put together) against this ideal. Minor variations from the standard are often acceptable; however, major conformational flaws may influence the horse’s performance and can predispose horses to orthopedic disease in the future.

The general health exam not only assesses vital signs (heart rate, respiratory rate, temperature), but also investigates all the details of the animal’s health. We thoroughly evaluate each body system to find evidence of past disease, current illness, or propensity for problems in the future. Systems examined include the eyes, respiratory tract, gastrointestinal tract, cardiovascular system, lymphatics, and neurologic system. The skin is closely examined for scars, either as the result of injury or previous surgeries.

While the horse’s overall health is important, the true heart of the pre-purchase exam is evaluation of the musculoskeletal system. Because a large portion of a horse’s value is its athletic abilities, it is critical to know what you are getting. After visual inspection, the horse’s joints, bones, tendons, and ligaments are felt (“palpated”) and manipulated by the senior faculty member, residents, interns, and students. Hoof testers are applied to all four feet to detect any pain. The horse is then evaluated walking and trotting on hard ground on a straight line and on circles. The joints of the limbs are flexed, and then the horse is asked to jog away to see if subtle (or previously unseen) problems can be exacerbated.

The preceding steps are performed for every horse we pre-purchase. Additional tests are performed as the buyer wishes. These include radiographs, upper airway endoscopy, blood tests for general health, drug testing, genetic testing, and breeding soundness exams.

A horse may be a financial investment, a working partner, or the family pet. In any situation, the investment in time, money, and emotion given to the horse warrants getting a pre-purchase exam before you finalize the transaction.