



Equine behaviourist Dr Debbie Marsden believes that horses should be ridden as soon as possible after arriving at their new base

It's probably not unlike children starting a new school," she explains.

It is rare for a horse to change homes with an existing companion — unless the purchaser bought two at the same time — so Debbie recommends trying to have some continuity of human contact if possible.

"It can be helpful for you to spend time with the horse before he leaves his previous home, if the seller permits this. Even a few short visits before leaving are better than one try-out ride. Chat away to the horse so that he gets used to your voice."

Debbie points out that this is also a great way to find out details about a horse's routine that will help to keep everyone safe.

"Is he used to being led in or out singly or in a pair? How does he manage at gates?"

As horses' digestive tracts are so sensitive to change, Debbie advises asking the seller for some of their hay.

"Make up the horse's haynets from half of his previous hay and half of your new hay for a few days so that he doesn't experience a sudden change. If you're going to change his feed, don't do it for a couple of weeks, and then only one handful of new feed at a time every three days."

While all horses are different, most will settle within a couple of weeks once out of isolation.

"One of the most important things to get right is the new social group — finding horses that your new one will get along with — and some experimentation may be necessary," says Debbie.

Signs that a horse is starting to settle include more consistent droppings and flat patches where he will have lain down or rolled.

"A settled horse will potter about eating for a couple of hours, then stay resting with his ears at about withers height for a couple of hours. He should lie down for around half an hour mid-morning, and flat out for about 15-20 minutes between 12-2am," says Debbie.

New owners who spend time with their recent acquisition will also start to see the results of this before too long.

"You'll notice him learning your habits and starting to react to your activity; for example, coming to the door when you arrive, or lifting his legs for hoof picking out and so on. Then you're well on your way to developing a good relationship," says Debbie.

Saddling up

When it comes to the question of how soon to ride a new equine, Natalie and Debbie both agree that it should be as soon as possible.

"It's really important for the horse's physical and mental health to maintain previous exercise patterns, and riding is a great way to properly get to know your horse and remind him that it's business as usual, that you're in charge and that he isn't alone," says Debbie. "This will be reassuring for him."

Natalie adds: "You should take into account the new horse's age, level of training and temperament. If he's quite a straightforward horse, the sooner you ride him the better. The longer you leave it, the more it can become an issue for horse and rider."

Debbie points out that exercising a horse is also a good way to check that he's physically fine after the move.

"Does the horse behave, move and feel as he did when he was tried and vetted," she says. "If there's a problem, the sooner it can be discovered and dealt with the better."

Debbie also recommends keeping the horse's exercise and work pattern as similar as possible to that in his previous home — to begin with at least.

"Even a week or so of this will really help your horse to adjust and then you can gradually alter the pattern," she advises.



Take a new partnership in micro steps — including the riding element

"It's important for the horse's physical and mental health to maintain previous exercise patterns"