

Demography and management of British horses, 2009-2011

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The equine population of Great Britain (GB) is estimated at over one million, yet data regarding demographic characteristics are limited. This study aimed to describe the demographics and assess seasonal and geographical variations in management of the British horses. A cross-sectional study was conducted, using a postal questionnaire survey of randomly selected horse owners registered with 30 veterinary practices in GB. 797 questionnaire responses were received. Median age of animals was 13 years; 56% were male; 33% were ponies (≤ 147.3 cm) and the most common breeds were Thoroughbred (TB)/TB-cross (25%) and Welsh/Welsh-cross (17%). Most animals (87%) were kept at or within 10 km of their owners' home premises. Only 4% were stabled 24 hours/day, with a greater proportion stabled full time in winter compared to other seasons ($P < 0.001$). Duration of stabling differed between seasons ($P < 0.001$) but not geographically. Most (92%) had access to pasture (median 91 hours/week), with seasonal and geographical variation in pasture turnout (both $P < 0.001$). Most animals received forage (83%) and concentrate feeding (86%). Retired animals and ponies less frequently received any supplementary feed and feeding practices varied seasonally. The majority of animals were used for pleasure riding (61%) and 18% were used primarily for competition, with geographic variation in proportions participating in certain ridden disciplines. Animals were exercised for a median of 5 hours/week. In the 7 days, 22% had been transported by vehicle, for a median of 35 minutes, with seasonal variation in distance travelled and journey time ($P = 0.01$). Demographic characteristics of this study population are similar to previous descriptions of the GB equine population. Seasonal and geographical variations in feeding and management practices were identified, and primary use and management differed for horses and ponies, which will be relevant in the investigation and management of diseases.