

EQUINE VITAL SIGNS

1. Temperature

The normal body temperature of a horse is 99-101 F. A temperature higher than that may indicate an infection. A healthy horse's temperature can vary by 3 degrees depending on environmental factors. Horses tend to have higher temperatures in warm weather and during/after exercise, stress or excitement. As a general rule of thumb you should take the horse's temperature often when you suspect a problem and call your veterinarian if it reaches or exceeds 102 F.

How to take your horse's temperature

The most accurate way to take a horse's temperature is rectally. Always secure a string to the end of the thermometer, so that it doesn't get lost. Tack shops and drug stores sell all types of thermometers. Digital read thermometers work very well and are easy to read. The horse should be tied or held by an assistant. Lubricate the tip of the thermometer with petroleum jelly, Vaseline or saliva. Move the horse's tail to the side and out of the way. Insert the thermometer into the horse's rectum, angled slightly towards the ground. Do not stand directly behind the horse, because some horses don't like this – but most don't mind. *Always clean the thermometer well before returning it to its case, especially if used on an ill horse. This will minimize the spreading of a potentially contagious illness.*

2. Pulse

The pulse rate of an adult horse at rest averages 30-40 beats per minute (bpm). A pulse rate of 50 or higher in an adult horse at rest may mean the horse is in physical distress. The average pulse rate for young horses is as follows:

Foals (70-120 bpm) Yearlings (45-60 bpm) 2 yr. olds (40-50 bpm)

The horse's pulse rate will increase if he is excited or nervous, in pain, during/after exercise, or is ill. The higher the heart rate, the more severe the condition.

How to check a horse's pulse:

The horse's pulse can be found near the front of the left jawbone. Under the jawbone, there is a major artery that slightly sticks out. Using your forefinger (never your thumb – because you will most likely feel your own pulse), press against the artery firmly. Use a clock or counter to time a 15 second period. Multiply the number of beats you counted by 4.

3. Respiration

The average respiration rate of an adult horse at rest is 8-15 breaths per minute. A horse's respiration rate increases with hot or humid weather, exercise, fever or pain. Rapid breathing at rest should receive veterinary attention, and keep in mind that the respiration rate should NEVER exceed the pulse rate. A horse should also spend equal time inhaling and exhaling.

How to check the respiration rate:

Watch or feel your horse's ribcage/belly for one minute. Be sure to count 1 inhale and 1 exhale as one breath (not two). Each breath is fairly slow. If you are having difficulty seeing the ribcage move, try watching the horse's nostrils or place your hand in front of the nostrils to feel the horse exhale.

An even better method is to place a stethoscope in the horse's windpipe to listen to his breathing. This will also give you strange sounds if the horse's windpipe is blocked by mucous or if he has allergies or heaves.

4. Gut sounds

The gut sounds that come from your horse's stomach and intestines can be very important information for your vet to diagnose and illness. Gut sounds should always be present. The absence of gut sounds is more indicative of a problem than excessive gut sounds. Usually, the absence of gut sounds indicates colic. If you don't hear any sounds, contact your veterinarian.

How to check for gut sounds:

Press your ear up against your horse's barrel just behind his last rib. If you hear gurgling noises, he's fine. Be sure to check gut sounds from both sides. If you do not hear any sounds, try using a stethoscope in the same area.

5. Dehydration

Healthy horses drink a minimum of 5 gallons of water per day. If your horse is dehydrated, it is very important that you urge him to drink. If he refuses to drink, check the cleanliness and odor of his water bucket. If all of these things check out contact your veterinarian. Most people know to check for a skin tent to evaluate dehydration, but a more reliable indication is to lift the upper lip and slide your finger above the teeth, adjacent to the gums. If the gums are moist and slick your horse is unlikely to be dehydrated. If they are sticky or foamy then it's likely he's dehydrated.

6. Capillary Refill Time (CRT)

Capillary refill time (CRT) is the time it takes for blood to return to blanched tissues in the gums. This is an indicator of blood circulation. Normal refill time is 1-2 seconds.

How to check CRT:

Lift your horse's upper lip up and firmly press your thumb against his gums for 2 seconds to create a white mark. This white mark should return to the normal pink color within 1-2 seconds after releasing the pressure. If the CRT takes longer than 2 seconds, the horse may have shock.

7. Mucous Membranes

The mucous membranes are the lining of a horse's eyelids, his gums and the inside of his nostrils. The color of the mucous membranes is another indicator of blood circulation. A healthy horse's gums are slightly more pale than a humans. If a horse's gums are very pale, bright red, grayish blue or bright yellow, call a veterinarian immediately. The healthy color of the mucous membranes is a moist pink.