



Knowing Your Horse's Vitals Has Many Benefits

The Educated Horseman: Health Series



If you own, ride or handle horses, at some point your horse probably will experience an injury, illness or disease.

Some cases will be minor and will not require veterinary attention. For the serious events, however, there is language that is important to understand and terms that will help you communicate effectively with your veterinarian.

These terms are fairly simple, but during stressful situations even the most experienced horse owner may have difficulty communicating. Therefore, it is important to understand the vital terms and practice the associated skills before an emergency occurs.

Temperature

A horse's normal rectal body temperature is 100.5 degrees Fahrenheit (or in the 99-101.5 range). 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. A high fever doesn't always indicate a severe condition, but it is a good idea to take your horse's temperature often and call your veterinarian if its temperature is more than 102 F.

How to take a 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 it doesn't get lost. Tack shops and pharmacies sell all types of thermometers. Plastic digital thermometers work very well and generally are easier to use, and most of them beep when they are done. If you use an older mercury-type thermometer, be sure you shake down the mercury before taking the horse's temperature. The horse should be tied, or held still, by an assistant. Lubricate the tip of the thermometer with petroleum jelly or Vaseline. Move the horse's tail to the side and out of the way and insert the thermometer into the horse's rectum, angled slightly toward the ground. Do not stand directly behind the horse. For the most accurate reading, leave the thermometer in position for at least three minutes. Many digital thermometers work well in less than a minute. Always clean the thermometer well before returning it to its case, especially if used on an ill horse, to prevent the spreading any illness.

Pulse

Normal heart rate for an adult horse at rest is an average 35-40 beats per minute. A pulse rate of 50 or higher in an adult horse at rest may mean the horse is in physical distress. The average rates for young horses are: Foals, 70-120 beats per minute; yearlings, 45-60 beats per minute; and 2 year olds, 40-50 beats per minute. The horse's pulse rate will increase if it is excited, nervous or in pain, during/after exercise or if it has a disease. As a rule of thumb, the higher the heart rate, the more severe the condition.

How to take a pulse: The facial artery can be found at the bottom side of the jaw where it crosses over the bone. Count the beats for 15 seconds and multiply by four to achieve beats per minute. You can use a stethoscope to listen to the heart beating in the chest. Place the stethoscope on the left side of the chest just behind the elbow. It often is easier to hear if that leg is forward. You will have to apply some pressure to hear it. Each "lub-dub" is one beat. Again, count for 15 seconds and multiply by four.



A horse's resting respiration rate should be 8-15 beats per minute.

Respiration

The average respiration rate of an adult at rest is eight to 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 spend equal time inhaling and exhaling.

How to take the respiration rate: Watch or feel horse's ribcage/belly for one minute. Be sure to count one inhale and one exhale as one breath (not as 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. You also can use a stethoscope to listen to your horse's trachea or to listen to its lungs. Note any funny sounds you hear, such as crackling, squeaking or rattling.

Gut Sounds

The gut sounds that come from your horse's stomach and intestines can be very important information for your veterinarian to diagnose an illness. Gut sounds always should be present. On average, a healthy horse will produce three to four gurgling sounds per minute. The absence of gut sounds is more indicative of a problem than excessive gut sounds. Usually, an absence of gut sounds indicates colic. If you don't hear any sounds, contact your veterinarian.

How to check for gut sounds: To check for gut sounds, press a stethoscope or your ear up against your horse's barrel just behind its last rib. Be sure to check gut sounds from both sides.

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 it to drink. If the horse refuses to drink water, try adding flavor to it (such as Gatorade or apple juice), and contact your veterinarian if it still won't drink.

How to perform a pinch test: Pinch the skin on your horse's neck. It is normal if the skin flattens back into place in less than one second when you let go. If it doesn't flatten out that quickly, that means your horse isn't drinking enough water and may be dehydrated. The longer the skin stays pinched up before flattening, the more dehydrated the horse is.

Capillary Refill Time

Capillary refill time is the time it takes for blood to return to blanched tissues in the gums. This is an indicator of blood circulation and also can be used as a measure of dehydration. Normal refill time is one to two seconds.

How to check capillary refill time: Lift your horse's upper lip up and firmly press your thumb against its gums for two seconds to create a white mark. This white mark should return to the normal pink color within one to two seconds after you release the pressure.

Mucous Membranes

The mucous membranes are the lining of a horse's eyelids, its gums and the inside of its nostrils. The colors of the mucous membranes are another indicator of blood circulation. A healthy horse's gums are slightly more pale than a human's. If a horse's gums are very pale, bright red, grayish blue or bright yellow, call a veterinarian immediately. Dry gums or gums that feel sticky indicate the horse may be dehydrated. These gum colors could indicate:

- **Moist pink** – Healthy normal circulation.
- **Very pale pink** – Capillaries contracted; also can be an indication of fever, blood loss or anemia.
- **Bright red** – Capillaries enlarged; can indicate toxicity or mild shock.
- **Gray or blue** – Severe shock, depression and illness.
- **Bright yellow** – Associated with liver problems.

Keep vital information on your horse where you can refer to it when necessary. Practicing these skills provides a number of benefits. You will become more familiar with the language necessary to communicate effectively with your veterinarian. You also will learn what is "normal" for your horse, and you will be more prepared to handle an emergency.

Always, when in doubt, call your veterinarian for guidance and information concerning the health and well-being of your horse.

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References

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