

How to Use Equine Vital Signs

Your horse relies on you to help him in the event of an illness. Knowing how to perform a few simple tests to determine your horse's vital signs, and knowing your horse's normal rates, will help you make a prompt and accurate assessment of his condition should you suspect that he's sick. The information will be useful if you need to discuss the situation with a veterinarian, too.

Ranges of vital signs are considered normal for various horses. What would be a high temperature in one horse is normal in another. The best way to determine a horse's normal vital signs is to test him at different times of day and on different days for about a week, remembering that temperature, pulse and respiratory rates will be higher just after exercise or excitement. Chart the readings you take until you notice a satisfactory, repeated value.

Once you've determined the normal vital signs for your horse, you'll be able to check for those values when you suspect an illness or other physical distress in the horse. You may wish to maintain this information within your medical kit, on a card on your horse's stall or in a conveniently located medical file. To help you create a medical file, a Routine Equine Medical Record is available for your use as part of this article.

You'll also want to monitor the color, consistency and usual amount of output of your horse's manure and urine. This information can provide useful clues about your horse if he becomes ill. If any of these signs ever seem abnormal, you should contact your veterinarian.

Temperature

The normal range for a horse's temperature is 99.5 to 101.5 degrees Fahrenheit. If you find a temperature of 102.5 degrees or higher in your horse, contact a veterinarian.

You can use a veterinary horse thermometer with string and clip attached to the end or a digital thermometer. The alligator clip tied to the end of a veterinary thermometer enables you to clip it to the horse's tail, freeing you to check other vital signs while the temperature is taken.

Take a horse's temperature rectally. If you're using a veterinary thermometer, shake it down to below 95 degrees before use. Lubricate the end of the thermometer with petroleum jelly, and angle the thermometer

very slightly downward on insertion. It is always best to observe an experienced person taking a temperature before you attempt to do so yourself. Leave a veterinary thermometer in place for two minutes to obtain an accurate reading.

If you're using a digital thermometer that doesn't have a string and clip attached, be sure to hold onto the thermometer while standing carefully to the side of the horse's buttocks. A digital thermometer will beep to signify when the temperature reading is ready.

Clean the thermometer thoroughly with rubbing alcohol after use.



Stand to the side of your horse's buttock while taking the temperature.

Pulse or Heart Rate

The pulse or heart rate for an adult horse ranges from 32 to 44 beats per minute. Pulse rate naturally increases during physical exertion, but a high pulse in a horse that is at rest indicates that he may be in some sort of pain or physical distress.

You can take a horse's pulse either by feeling for it, listening to the heartbeats with a stethoscope or using the Polar Equine Healthcheck, a tool that when placed near your horse's elbow provides an accurate heart rate in 8-10 seconds.

To take the pulse by feel, you can try various places on the horse. Sometimes you can feel it with the back of your hand pressed against the horse's heart girth on the left side.

Normal Ranges of Equine Vital Signs

Temperature	99.5-101.5 degrees Fahrenheit
Pulse	Adult horses: 32-44 beats per minute
Respiration	8-16 breaths per minute
Gut sounds	Should be present
Capillary Refill Time	2 seconds
Mucous Membranes	Moist and pink

HELPFUL TIP:

Take the time to know the values that are normal for your horse at rest and after exertion. Record these normal values on your horse's medical chart. Doing so can give your veterinarian a head start on diagnosing your horse in the event of an illness.



Back of hand held to heart girth to feel for the heartbeat.

You can feel for certain arteries that are close to the skin: the facial artery under the horse's left jawbone, the artery under the tail on either side of the dock, or at the outside of the horse's foot, just above the fetlock.

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Finding the facial artery.

Pulse or Heart Rate *continued*

To feel for the facial artery, press two or three fingers under the round part of the jawbone on the left side of the face. The artery crosses the jawbone at about the middle point, and feels like a thin rope situated just toward the inside. You may have an easier time finding it by gently pressing the fleshy parts under the jaw against the inside of the jawbone.

Look at a watch and count the heartbeats for 10 seconds, then multiply the number of beats by six to determine total beats per minute. (If it is easier for you, count for 15 seconds and multiply the number of beats by four.)

Note: Do not take the pulse using your thumb, as you may feel your own pulse instead of the horse's pulse.

To use a stethoscope, place it just behind the horse's left elbow and count each thump-thump as one heartbeat. Again, look at a watch and count the heartbeats for 10 seconds, then multiply the number of beats by six to determine total beats per minute. (If it is easier for you, count for 15 seconds and multiply the number of beats by four.)

Respiration

The respiration range in a horse is 8 to 16 breaths per minute. Each inhale together with exhale counts as one breath, and the rate in and out should be steady. Respiration



Watching the flank to identify inhale/exhale.

speeds up during exercise, in the presence of fever or when a horse is in pain. If the respiration is rapid in a horse that has been at rest, or if the pace of the inhale versus the exhale is unsteady, consult a veterinarian.

To count breaths, watch your horse's flank or ribcage for one minute. If you are having trouble identifying the breaths, you may want to watch his nostrils instead or lay your hand against the horse's side.

Capillary Refill Time

Capillary refill time indicates the level of blood circulation and can help you determine whether the horse might be in shock. To test capillary refill time, hold a horse's lip up and press a finger on his gum for a couple of seconds, long enough to leave a white mark. Remove your finger and watch to see if the white spot disappears in 2 seconds. If the spot remains longer, the horse may be dehydrated or in shock; proceed to check the mucous membranes.

Mucous Membranes

The color of mucous membranes also indicates the level of blood circulation, or may indicate various serious medical conditions such as liver disease. The horse's gums, the inside of his nostrils, and the lining of his eyes should be pink and moist. If they are very pale pink, very yellow, bright red or grayish blue, speak with your veterinarian as a serious condition may exist.

Dehydration

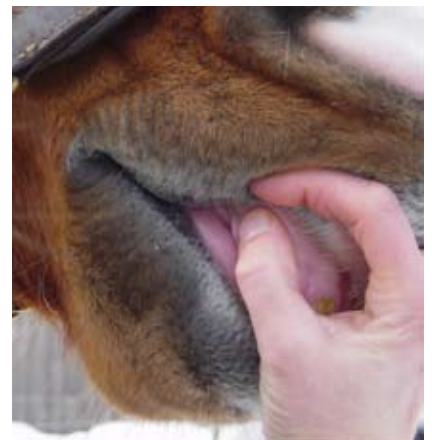
At times, you may find it helpful to assess whether your horse has consumed enough water. To check for dehydration, pinch some skin on your horse's shoulder. When you let go, the skin should slip back into place in about a second. If the skin stays pinched and only slowly returns to place, then the horse may be dehydrated. The longer the pinch mark remains, the more dehydrated the horse may be. You should encourage the horse to drink and consider administering electrolytes. If the horse is both dehydrated and in distress, consult a veterinarian.

Gut Sounds

Gut sounds emanate from a horse's intestines and stomach, and should always be present. If you do not hear gut sounds, it may mean that activity in the horse's digestive system has stopped, indicating potential colic.

Get to know your horse's normal gut sounds—the gurgling and growling—so that you'll recognize any abnormality should the need arise. Some horses have very loud gut sounds that are easily heard by laying an ear against the horse's barrel, near the flank. Others have gut sounds that are more difficult to discern, and the use of a stethoscope may be in order.

Always listen for gut sounds on both sides of the horse's barrel; you'll often notice more noise on one side than on the other.



Note the healthy pink color and moistness of this horse's gums.



Pinching the skin on a horse's shoulder.

YEARLY ROUTINE EQUINE MEDICAL RECORD*

Horse: _____ Year: _____

Normal Temperature: _____ Normal Pulse Rate: _____ Normal Respiration: _____

Item	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Flu/Rhino												
Rabies												
Strangles												
Potomac												
EWT												
West Nile												
Coggins												
Dentist												
Fecal												
Deworming												
Farrier												
Other												

Notes

*Review this chart with your veterinarian for any additions, deletions or changes that he or she may recommend.