

VITAL SIGNS

Use this clip-and-save guide to record your horse's temperature, pulse, respiration, capillary refill time, and gut sounds, then to learn what your findings might mean.

Your horse doesn't seem right. He may pick at his feed, or not eat at all. Perhaps he's just quieter than normal or seems dull. What should you do?

Take his vital signs. His temperature, pulse, respiration, capillary refill time, and gut sounds can give you valuable insights into his health, and can often help you

catch a minor problem before it morphs into a major one. Plus, they'll help your vet determine if (and how fast) he or she needs to see your horse.

Note: Use this guide to establish a baseline "normal" at rest. (Exercise can increase your horse's temperature, pulse, and respiration.) That way, you can easily identify a "blip."

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- **Digital, instant-read thermometer.** About \$10 at variety/drug stores.
- **KY or petroleum jelly.** About \$2 to \$5 at drug stores; use to lubricate thermometer tip.
- **Stethoscope.** About \$10 to \$15 (and up) via vet-supply catalog or feed/drug store.
- **Watch or timer.** Choose a watch with a second hand or a digital timer.

CLIP & SAVE VITAL-SIGNS GUIDE

VITAL SIGN: TEMPERATURE

HOW TO TAKE IT: Activate digital thermometer; dab tip with lubricant. Gently insert tip in horse's anus to a depth of 2 inches; hold in place until it beeps to indicate reading is complete.

NORMAL RANGE: 99° to 101.5°

POSSIBLE CAUSE OF ABNORMAL SIGN:

Above normal: infection, heat exhaustion, exercise.

Below normal: shock, hypothermia.

TIPS: Normal resting temp will be lowest in early morning and up to 2 degrees higher late afternoon. For a baseline, take it three times/day for a week. Average the readings for each time of day.

VITAL SIGN: PULSE

HOW TO TAKE IT: Place stethoscope bell behind the point of your horse's left elbow; press into "armpit" there. Count each "lub-dub" you'll hear as one beat for 15 seconds, using a watch/timer. Multiply by four to determine beats per minute (bpm).

NORMAL RANGE: 30 to 44 bpm.

POSSIBLE CAUSE OF ABNORMAL SIGN:

Above normal: pain (such as colic), fever, heat exhaustion, heart problem, anxiety, exercise.

Below normal: heart problem, shock, hypothermia, poisoning, good athletic condition.

TIPS: A wide stethoscope bell makes accurate placement less critical than a small bell.

VITAL SIGN: RESPIRATION

HOW TO TAKE IT: Place stethoscope bell on center of your horse's throat 6 to 8 inches below his throatlatch to listen for breaths; or, watch nostril flares or rise/fall of ribcage/flank. Count number of breaths taken in a 15-second period. Multiply by four to determine breaths per minute (bpm).

NORMAL RANGE: 10 to 15 bpm.

POSSIBLE CAUSE OF ABNORMAL SIGN:

Above normal: pain (as from colic), fever, respiratory infection, shock, heat exhaustion, exercise.

Below normal: shock, hypothermia, drug effect, good athletic condition.

TIPS: Nostril flare and ribcage/flank movement should be minimal in a healthy horse at rest. Flared nostrils and/or heaving sides could indicate a problem.

VITAL SIGN: CAPILLARY REFILL TIME (CRT)

HOW TO TAKE IT: Lift your horse's upper lip. Press your thumb on his gums hard enough to blanch out the color. Remove your thumb and count how many seconds it takes the gums to resume normal color.

NORMAL RANGE: 1 to 2 seconds.

POSSIBLE CAUSE OF ABNORMAL SIGN:

Slower than normal: illness, shock, poisoning.

Faster than normal: elevated blood pressure, likely due to excitement, anxiety, or exercise.

TIPS: Also observe gum color: Pale to bubble-gum pink is normal. Whitish gums may indicate anemia or shock. Bluish, brick red, or mud-colored could mean shock or poisoning.

VITAL SIGN: GUT SOUNDS

HOW TO TAKE IT: Mentally divide your horse's abdomen into five segments: high flank, low flank, high belly (between flank and ribs), low belly, and lower belly (near the belly's midline). Press the stethoscope bell onto each section on both sides of your horse and listen for *at least* 30 seconds (the longer, the better).

NORMAL RANGE: Long, rolling rumbles interspersed with short gurgles; quiet periods that last no longer than 2 minutes.

POSSIBLE CAUSE OF ABNORMAL SIGN:

Noisier than normal: hunger, meal digestion, anxiety, inflammation.

High-pitched pings mixed with silent spells: accumulated gas (often signals colic).

Quieter than normal: slowed or stopped motility (often signals colic or illness).

TIPS: There may be a 2-minute quiet interval between sounds in a normal horse. If you don't listen long enough, you may think there are no sounds.