



BASIC HORSE CARE IS MORE THAN BASIC

By Megan Arszman

The road to the Congress and World Show is a long one, made only longer depending on how far you actually have to haul your horse to Ohio and Oklahoma. During the trip, you may make a stop for fuel and check your horse, but something just doesn't seem quite right. Do you know how to listen for gut sounds, check a digital pulse, or take a rectal temperature? Because of the availability of show veterinarians and knowledge of horse trainers, it's easy for horse owners to get complacent. As a result, many people don't know how to perform simple, horse health, vital diagnostics.

DO YOU RELY TOO MUCH ON OTHERS TO KEEP YOUR HORSE HEALTHY?

WHAT ARE THE BASICS?

The best time to know your horse's vitals is to know them before an issue arises. "It's imperative to know your horse's vitals when they are normal and relaxed," says Bonnie Comerford, DVM, a veterinarian based in Ocala, Florida. "You need a resting rate, which means not prior to feeding, not while under tack or right after exercise, and not after he's been out in the sun, thus raising his temperature."

This means that if you need to take your horse's vitals after he's been exercised, it's important to wait 20-30 minutes for recovery, because all levels will be elevated immediately after work. This is also helpful to get your horse used to you performing these actions and placing your

continued on page 216

hands in places where he may not be comfortable.

“It’s helpful if you take two weeks and perform vital sign checks on your horses around the same time each day, so you have a good idea of what’s normal for each horse,” she advises.

WRITE IT DOWN

Basic health care of your horse is mostly good observation of his daily life: How does he react when it’s feeding time? How well does he eat? What is his manure like in his stall? How much water does he usually consume overnight? Taking the time to really observe and take notes in a notebook, that can be readily available in the barn or trailer, is a valuable tool for your horse’s care.

“Provide horse health information cards for each horse in your care to be filled out and laminated so they go along with the horse when traveling,” Dr. Comerford says. “If it’s your personal horse, providing this information to your trainer can help expedite any concerns or care.”

So what should you know when it comes to your horse’s health parameters?

Temperature: Dr. Comerford recommends having at least one digital thermometer in the barn and one in the trailer, each with a long piece of twine tied to the end to prevent losing the thermometer. Another helpful preparation tip is to use lubrication, such as Vaseline or medical grade lubrication, to aid in insertion. Standing close to the horse’s hind end, with your hand resting on the hip, you will reach under the tail and insert the thermometer. Once you hear the beep of the thermometer [after two minutes], you can remove the instrument and note the temperature. Make sure you clean off and replace the cap to the thermometer before you put it away.

- **Normal adult horse resting temperature: 99° - 101°F**
- **Normal foal resting temperature: 99.5° - 102°F**

VITAL TOOLS FOR VITAL SIGNS

Here is just a sampling of the tools you should have on hand to perform these vital signs tests. Having a first-aid kit with these tools available, not only in the barn, but also your trailer, will aid in diagnosis.

- Watch with a secondhand or a time keeping device, such as the timer on your cell phone
- Stethoscope
- Digital thermometer with string tied at the end
- Journal or notebook with notes of normal measurements

Heart Rate: The horse’s heart is located right behind the elbow- where you’d place the girth when saddling. The easiest way to take your horse’s heart rate is to purchase your own stethoscope. When you place the stethoscope at the horse’s heart, count how many heartbeats you hear in 15 seconds and then multiply that number by four.



Courtesy of Kentucky Equine Research

A VET CHECKING THE HORSE’S GUMS

- **Normal adult horse resting heart rate: 28-44 beats per minute**
- **Normal foal resting heart rate: 90-120 beats per minute**
- **Newborn foal (less than 36 hours old): 70-150 beats per minute**

Pulse: Standing by the horse’s head, you should feel for the facial artery, which has been described as the size and feel of bailing twine. It will roll under your fingers. Count the number of beats for 15 seconds and then multiply by four.

Another option for taking a pulse is the artery on the lower front leg. If you squat down beside the front leg, facing the horse, you’ll place your hand around the fetlock with your thumb and index finger wrapping just above the joint. Your fingers should go right on those arteries. *Note: This is not a strong, bounding pulse in this location. If you feel a strong, bounding digital pulse in the leg, that can be a sign of laminitis.*

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- **Normal foal resting pulse rate: 90-120 beats per minute**

Hoof Temperature: You should check your horse’s hoof temperature on a routine basis for a couple of weeks in order to know the typical temperature. If there is excessive heat from the coronet band down, that’s a reason to call your veterinarian.

Respiration: No stethoscope on hand? No problem! You can check your horse’s respiration rate by observing their breathing.

1. Look at the flank area and count how many breaths the horse takes in 30 seconds or one minute.

continued on page 218

2. Look at the horse's nostrils and watch the nostrils flare for every intake of breath.

- **Normal adult horse resting respiration rate: 12-15 breaths per minute**
- **Normal foal resting respiration rate: 30-40 breaths per minute**
- **Newborns: 60-80 breaths per minute**
- **When relaxed, horses do not breathe quickly, so don't become alarmed.**
- **Don't put your hand in front of the horse's nose, because he might be more interested in sniffing your hand than breathing regularly.**

If your horse has an abnormal respiratory rate, what does that mean? An increase in respiratory rate could mean heat stress, pain, illness or nervousness. If your horse has irregular, shallow, labored, or even noisy breathing, this could be a sign of a serious issue, prompting you to contact your veterinarian.

Hydration Level: Especially while traveling, this is an important test for your horse. Standing beside your horse, facing the neck, you can do a skin pinch test in the middle of the neck.

TECHNO TRACKER

Paper and pen not your thing, or too easy to get lost? There just might be an app for that.

The team at Kentucky Equine Research has developed a free application for horse owners to track their horse's heart rate. The KER ClockIt Sport app (available for iPhones and Android) helps riders, trainers, and owners keep track of their horse's conditioning. The app is free, but there is a premium subscription offered that gives owners access to more in-depth session reports and insights, such as breakdowns of each ride (with a map and graph that can show speed, altitude, and heart rate).

An odometer is used to accumulate mileage through workouts, see workout summaries, and compare your training program to others. There is an associated heart rate monitor, which allows the app to translate heart rate data into an easy-to-understand visual chart. Trainers can use the app to create conditioning programs for their horses in-house or with their owners and track each horse's conditioning, even if they're states away.



Courtesy of Kentucky Equine Research

1. Take a pinch of skin and then let it go.
2. Count the seconds that it takes for the skin to return to normal. If the skin returns to normal within two seconds, then the horse is properly hydrated.
3. If the skin takes longer than approximately two seconds to return to normal, or stays in the pinch, it's an indicator of severe dehydration. Count the number of seconds it takes until it goes down and inform your vet.

Capillary Refill: Checking the capillary refill time of your horse's gums means checking the change in color of the mucus membranes. This is an estimate of your horse's blood pressure.

- **Normal gums should be pink.**
- **If the color of the gums is brick red, white, or yellow, those are abnormal and need to be reported to your veterinarian immediately.**

To see the refill time, press down hard on the gum with your thumb until it blanches, or turns white, and then release. The gums should go back to the normal pink color within two seconds. You can also do this on the lower gum if that's easier than the upper gum. If the gums are pure white, it's a high-risk indicator that something bad is going on with your horse.

Take Home Message

You are your horse's biggest advocate, both in and out of the show pen, so make sure you're his biggest advocate when it comes to his health care as well. Taking the time to get to know your horse's normal vital signs will help you quickly counteract any health issues that might arise, either at home or at a show.