



United in Leadership, Education and Service

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### **Vital Signs and Assessments for Equids**

Know the horse's healthy vital signs and be able to evaluate and recognize deviations from the normal.

**Body Temperature:** Taken with a digital rectal thermometer, normal body temperature will run between 99.0 and 100.5F. Stress, illness, and environmental factors will affect readings. Temps over 102F indicates some sort of fever, disease, infection, or hyperthermia.

**Pulse:** Normal heart rate for a resting, healthy, unstressed horse is 28 to 40 beats per minute. Pulse can be taken by palpating under the jaw, or the underside of the tail at the bone, or at the inside of the pastern. Finding a pulse at these places takes training and practice. An easier method is to use a stethoscope to listen for a heart rate. Pain, exercise, stress, fear, and excitement will raise the heart rate. An elevated heart rate is one of the first signs of colic.

**Respiration:** Normal respiration is 8 to 18 breaths per minute at rest. Inhalation and exhalation should be roughly the same, with no labored intake and no panting or huffing. Count by watching the horse's nostrils or torso at the end of its ribcage. Increased respiration can indicate pain, excitement, fever, stress.

**Mucous Membranes:** To check mucous membranes, lift the horse's lip and look at the color of his gums. Normal mucous membranes should be clear and moist, and gums soft pink in color. To check capillary refill time press gently on the gums and count the time it takes for the blood to return. Normal capillary refill time is 1 to 2 seconds. Gums which are pale, or dark red, or muddy, or which have a slow refill time indicate a serious problem which requires immediate veterinary assessment.

**Hydration:** To test for hydration pinch the skin on the horse's neck or shoulder. In a well-hydrated horse the skin should return to its normal position quickly. A horse suffering from dehydration will have a slower return time. (Tenting) Any dehydration should be considered cause for veterinary attention and appropriate intervention.

#### **The three classifications of dehydration are:**

**Mild—5-7% body weight in water loss.** Symptoms include depression, dry mucous membranes, slow capillary refill time (>2 seconds).

**Moderate—8-10% water loss.** Depression, weak pulse, sagging skin, elevated heart rate, poor jugular vein distension, prolonged capillary refill time (2-4 seconds).

**Severe—Greater than 10% water loss.** Symptoms include cold limbs, lethargy, and persistent skin "tenting." Horses may be near death with multiple organ failure.

**Abdominal (Gut) Sounds:** The normal digestive sounds in horses range from deep gurgling to "tinkling" sounds and are best interpreted by an experienced practitioner. However, the complete lack of any sounds from the horse's digestive tract is an indication that there may be an impaction or serious condition that requires veterinary attention.

\*\*\*This information is not meant to replace veterinary advice. If at any time your horse is injured or you are unsure if your horse is in distress, you should consult with your veterinarian.