



FACT SHEET

Department of Animal Science, University of Connecticut

Effective Horse Management – Horse Health Series

Vital Signs: What they mean and how to take them in your horse

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Vital signs are physical indications that let you know that your horse is living, such as temperature, pulse and respiration. These signs can be observed, measured, and monitored to indicate the horse's level of physical functioning. These signs change with age, sex, weight, fitness, and condition. Also, any abnormalities in these vital signs indicate an abnormal health status and should cause you to consult with your veterinarian. However, in order to tell what is abnormal for your horse you must first know what is normal.

You can practice by looking at the overall appearance of your horse. You want a horse that is bright, alert and responsive. In veterinary records this is abbreviated as BAR. You also want to practice measuring the horse's body condition using the body condition scoring system by Henneke on a regular basis. Condition scoring your horse about every three weeks or so is usually best. You also want to give the horse a physical exam when it is healthy to determine what is normal for the horse.

In order to measure temperature, pulse and respiration you need two tools. To measure the temperature of your horse you will need a rectal thermometer. You can get a digital rectal thermometer very inexpensively in any tack shop, tack catalog or at a local drug store. You may also choose to purchase a stethoscope for measuring the heart rate or pulse rather than just feeling for the pulse. This can also help you determine if your horse has any heart irregularities, since you can hear the beat rather than just feel it.

A healthy horse's temperature will range between 99 and 101 degrees Fahrenheit. A foal will usually have a higher temperature than an older horse. In order to measure the temperature you will need to stand close to your horse, next to his hind leg on the left but not directly behind him. Standing closer is better because this will lessen the force of the kick if he does attempt to

kick you. If you are kicked, it will not be as painful as it would be if you were standing further away giving the horse's leg time to gain force. You might want to consider tying a hair clip or paper holder to the thermometer so that you can clip it to the horse's tail while you are waiting for the reading. Make sure the thermometer is turned on. Carefully pull the tail aside, speaking to your horse, and gently insert the thermometer into the rectum. You might want to lubricate the thermometer with a lubricant like Vaseline or KY jelly in order to make the process more effective and less uncomfortable for your horse. Now wait until the thermometer beeps or flashes and take your reading. That is your horse's current temperature.

A healthy horse's pulse will range between 32 and 44 beats per minute at rest. A foal will usually have a higher pulse. A horse that has just been exercised will also have a higher pulse, but should recover to normal within about 5 minutes if he or she is fit. You can measure the pulse by pressing firmly with your forefinger on the facial artery (near the front of the left jawbone). Never use your thumb because then you may feel your own pulse. If you choose to use a stethoscope, place it on the left side of the horse close to his elbow right near the leg where the girth would go. Each heartbeat will make a lub-dup sound, and one of these sounds counts as one. Count the number of beats you feel or lub-dups you hear in 15 seconds, then multiply by 4. This is your horse's pulse rate.

A healthy horse's respiration will range between 8 and 16 breaths per minute. Again, a foal will usually have a higher respiration rate as will a horse that has just exercised. You can measure the respiration by watching the rise and fall of your horse's flank. One rise and fall equals one breath. Count the number of breaths you see in 15 seconds, then multiply by 4. This is your horse's respiration rate.

Remember that excitement, hot weather, pain and fever can increase temperature, heart rate and respiration. Knowing what is normal for your horse when it is resting will help you know when something is not right. It is good to record this information on a regular basis so that you can track changes in your horse. Often changes in these vital signs will occur even before you see other signs or symptoms of health issues in your horse. If there are abnormalities indicating a horse health issue, you'll be ready to communicate this information to your veterinarian so he/she can provide timely care for your horse.

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