**WHAT ARE THE NORMAL EQUINE VITAL SIGNS?**

This is a commonly asked question. While normal ranges exist for the horses, values can vary from horse to horse so we suggest that you know the individual vitals your horse.

Factors that can affect the normal vitals of your horse include age, breed, level of anxiety and physical fitness/conditioning of your horse.

Take the time to learn the vitals for your horse. You will get practice obtaining these values as well as having a good baseline to use if your horse becomes sick or distressed.

**The Normals:**

**Temperature:** We use 100.0-101.0 as our normal. The range varies with articles you might read (99.0-101.0) but temperatures below 100.0 are not usually a concern. While mercury thermometers are generally believed to be more accurate than their digital counterparts we generally recommend the digital to our clients. They have less risk of breaking and are usually within a tenth of a degree from the mercury thermometers. Placement is important, as is the lubricant you use on the thermometer. We use a small amount of spit or water as the lubricant. Other products such as Vaseline or KY gel may be at a different temperature from ambient and give a false temperature. Remember these digitals give a very quick readout. Also, place the thermometer deep into the anus….I generally insert the thermometer to the depth of the digital display for an accurate reading.

**Heart Rate:** The normal range for a horse is 32-44. The pulse can be obtained either with a stethoscope or by palpation of the vessels under the jaw or at the level of the fetlock. We recommend purchasing a stethoscope. Palpating the pulse is difficult under the best of circumstances but can become nearly impossible when your horse is down and distressed.

Stethoscope placement is on the left side of the horse between the leftfront leg and chest at the level of the elbow. Find the elbow and from here advance the scope forward between the leg and ribs. We generally count the number of beats in 15 seconds and multiply by 4 for our minute rate.

**Respiration Rate:** This value varies greatly between horses but generally I use 12-24 breaths per minute. While the rate of breathing is important, breathing effort is also important to observe. Is the horse extending the head to breath or is he showing increased effort to breath in or out. This is equally important when assessing breathing in your horse.

**Gut Motility:** This is a very subjective assessment and another one that knowing what is normal for your horse is important. Generally speaking a horse should have gut sounds over all quadrants (high/low on the right and left sides). Lack of gut sounds can be an indication of bowel stasis (decreased motility) and GI disease.

**Gum Color and Refill Time:** Typically the gums should be moist and pink in color. It is not uncommon for the color to look a bit pale when it is cold outside. Refill time is generally thought to be normal when it is less than 1 second. This is determined by pressing on the gums to blanch them and then releasing and assessing how long it takes for the color to come back. Capillary refill times (CRT) of greater than 2 seconds can be an indication of dehydration. Dark, injected mucous membranes may be a sign of more significant conditions such as septicemia.

Knowing how to get your horses vitals and having access to a thermometer and stethoscope will help us better assist you in managing your horse in the event of a colic or illness. Make a “cheat sheet” of your horse’s normal vital signs as well as the ones we have provided for you to keep with your equine first aid kit. Please see our other articles on what we feel should be in a comprehensive First Aid kit.

Sample Cheat Sheet

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Normal**  **Vital Signs** | **Date:**  **Horse:** | **Date:**  **Horse:** | **Date:**  **Horse:** | **Date:**  **Horse:** |
| Temperature | 100.0-100.0 °F |  |  |  |  |
| Heart Rate (HR) | 32-44 bpm |  |  |  |  |
| Respiratory Rate (RR) | 12-24 bpm |  |  |  |  |
| Gut Sounds | All 4 Quadrants |  |  |  |  |
| Gum Color/CRT | Pink/<1 sec |  |  |  |  |