

Horse Health and Wellness Series: 10 Key Indicators of Horse Health



As 2017 kicks off, USHJA is pleased to introduce a new bimonthly series on horse health and wellness based on guidance and input from the USHJA Horse and Rider Advocates Committee. This series aims to provide members with information they can use, along with the regular guidance of a veterinarian, to help keep their equine partners happy and healthy throughout the year.

These 10 indicators can help you recognize potential health issues. While the ranges provided are helpful, it's important that owners take a baseline of these metrics for their horses. Vital signs may differ by horse; if you have questions, always consult your veterinarian.

1. **Temperature:** An adult horse's body temperature should be between 99.5 and 101.5 F. While exercise may elevate a horse's temperature, it should return to normal after 90 minutes of rest.
2. **Pulse:** The heart rate in a resting adult horse is 30 to 42 beats per minute. Veterinarians recommend taking a horse's heart rate by placing a stethoscope on the rib cage just behind the left elbow.

3. **Respiration:** The normal respiration rate for a horse is 12 to 20 breaths per minute. This number will increase as the horse works. If the respiration rate increases while the horse is at rest, this may indicate a problem. It is important to be familiar with what is normal for your horse to know when something is wrong.
4. **Intestinal Sounds:** A healthy horse will have gurgling gut sounds. If no sounds are audible, this can be a sign of colic or other intestinal issues. Call a vet any time your horse is showing signs of abdominal discomfort.
5. **Capillary Refill Time:** Testing a horse's capillary refill time is done by pressing your thumb to your horse's gums, using enough pressure that color is lost. After removing your thumb, count how many seconds it takes for the color to return. The normal capillary refill time is 2 seconds or less.
6. **Healthy Hooves:** It is important that your horse receives regular care from a farrier. Cracks, contracted heels, and hooves that are too long may be signs of a potential issue and can cause serious soundness problems if not addressed. Horses should see a farrier every 4-8 weeks depending on conformation, hoof growth, hoof health, ground surface, and whether or not the horse has shoes. Consult with your farrier to create a plan for hoof care.
7. **Hydration:** Ensuring your horse is well hydrated is important. You can do a simple test by pinching the horse's skin where it is naturally taut, such as the neck or shoulder. The skin should immediately return to its original form. If it remains pinched, this may be a sign of dehydration.
8. **Coat and Body Condition:** Coat and body condition are subjective, and each horse is different. Typically, signs of trouble can be a dull coat or a horse that is obese or too thin. It's important to consult with your veterinarian to know what is normal for your horse and appropriate for his physical demands.
9. **Eyes:** A horse's eyes should be bright and clear. Sunken eyes, discoloration, cloudiness, discharge and/or swelling are abnormal and may require a veterinarian's attention.
10. **Nose:** A horse may have clear discharge, but greenish, yellow, bloody or white discharge may all indicate a problem.



These are just a few key indicators of a horse's health to monitor on a regular basis. Always consult with your veterinarian and farrier for guidance about your horse's health and to establish a baseline of what's normal for your horse. As always, when in doubt, contact your vet.

For more information about these and other horse health topics, visit these source articles:

[How Do I Take My Horse's Temperature," Ben Espy, DVM, DACT](#)

[Guidelines to Follow During Equine Emergencies," AAEP](#)

[Overweight Horse," AAEP](#)

[When Does a Horse Need a Farrier," Texas A&M University System Agricultural Communications, *The Horse*](#)