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Horse Vital Sign Basics, TPR + Gut Sounds

As a horse owner it's very valuable to be able to obtain and understand your horse's normal health parameters. These are very easy to assess and will give your veterinarian valuable information in an emergency. Below is normal parameters for most horses, but it's important to establish normals for *your* horse.

Supplies:

Quick read digital thermometer

(You can purchase a quick read digital thermometer at your local human pharmacy for \$7.00-\$10.00. Cheaper isn't always better, and look for one with a non-bendable end, this makes insertion easier.)

Stethoscope

(You can purchase an inexpensive stethoscope at a medical supply store, drug store, or horse supply catalog usually for under \$20.00.)

Temperature: Normal for an adult: 99.5° -101.5° F

Foals can run a little higher than adult horses. (Up to 102.0° F can be considered normal).

This is taken rectally. Place a small amount of lubricating jelly (or if you're in a bind a little bit of spit) on the end. Approach the horse from the side- don't stand directly behind, any horse can and will kick. Raise his tail gently or push it gently to the side, push the *on* button on the thermometer, wait for it to be ready, then insert the thermometer into his anus. Stand quietly and talk soothingly to him, and wait for the thermometer to beep. It is very important to take your horse's temperature before giving medications because they can sometimes alter the temp by 1-3 degrees.

Pulse/Heart Rate: Normal resting heart rate for an adult horse: 30-40 beats per minute.

The pulse rate & respiratory rate can be taken without a stethoscope, but a stethoscope can make it a lot easier. If a stethoscope is not available you can take your horse's pulse using the facial artery. This artery can be found at the bottom side of the jaw where it crosses over the bone. Count the beats for 15 seconds, and multiply by four to achieve beats per minute. You can use a stethoscope to listen to the heart beating in the chest. Place the stethoscope on the left side of the chest just behind the elbow. It is often easier to hear if that leg is forward. You will have to apply some pressure to hear it. Each "lub-dub" is one beat. Again count for 15 seconds, and multiply by four.

Respiratory Rate: Normal resting respiratory rate for an adult: 8-16 breaths per minute.

You can take the respiratory rate by watching the horse breathe. Each inhale or exhale is one breath. Count for 15 seconds and multiply by four. You can use your stethoscope to listen to your horse's trachea, or listen to his lungs. Note any funny sounds you hear; crackling, squeaking, or rattling. You can also hold a hand close to a nostril and count how many exhalations occurring 15 seconds and multiply by four.

Mucous Membrane Color and Capillary Refill Time (CRT):

Normal Mucous Membrane Color: pink.

If you take a look at your gums in the mirror you'll notice they are a nice healthy pink, and if you touch them they'll feel moist to the touch. Pink means your tissues are receiving enough oxygen-rich blood, and the moistness means you're hydrated. Your horse should look and feel the same way. Blue, purple, or white gums are bad. Those colors indicate the horse may be in trouble. Dry gums or gums that feel sticky indicate the horse may be dehydrated. If you look in the mirror again and press your finger to your gums and for just a second put pressure and then release you will see your gums turn white and then fill in pink again. This is called the capillary refill time (CRT). Do it again and count how many seconds it takes to refill to their nice healthy pink. It should be less than 2 seconds. You can do this test with your horse; a prolonged CRT indicates trouble.

Gut Sounds: Normal for an adult: 3/minute-4/minute

To listen to gut sounds you will need a stethoscope. If the gut sounds are very loud you may be able to hear them by listening with your ear up the horse's flank. You want to listen on both sides for 1 minute each.