

Recognizing Signs of Distress

It's important to know your horse's normal vital signs, including temperature, pulse, and respiration, as well as its normal behavior patterns.

By Cindy Hallet

What's Normal?

There will be variations in individual temperature, pulse, and respiration values. Take several baseline measurements when the horse *is healthy*, rested, and relaxed. Write down and keep them within easy reach, perhaps with your first aid kit, so you have them to compare to in case of an emergency. Normal ranges for adult horses are:

Pulse rate: 30-42 beats per minute

Respiratory rate: 12-20 breaths per minute

Rectal Temperature: 99.5 to 101.5 F. If a horse's temperature exceeds 102.5 F, contact your veterinarian immediately. Temperatures over 103 F indicate a serious disorder.

Capillary Refill Time: 2 seconds. This is the time it takes for color to return gum tissue adjacent to teeth after pressing and releasing with your thumb.

Other Observations you should note is tested by pinching or folding a flap of neck skin and releasing. It should immediately snap back into place. Failure to do so is evidence of dehydration.

Skin pliability

Color of the mucous membranes of the gums, nostril conjunctiva (inner eye tissue) and inner lips of vulva should be pink. Bright red, pale pink to white, or bluish-purple coloring may indicate problems

Color, consistency, and volume of feces and urine should be typical of that individual's usual excretions. Straining or failure to excrete should be noted.

Signs of distress, anxiety, or discomfort:

Lethargy, depression or a horse that -is "off-feed"-

Presence or absence of gut sounds.

Evidence of lameness such as head-bobbing, reluctance to move, odd stance, pain, unwillingness to rise.

Bleeding, swelling, evidence of pain.

Seizures, paralysis, or "tying up"

Know your horse's stall patterns (where he/she usually makes manure or urinates) and if unusually messed up (such as pawing or excessive rolling spots). Know your horse's turnout patterns (runs off when turned loose, first at gate to come in, etc.)

Have your Veterinarian's number handy. Keep it in your car, in the barn, and at your home. Also, keep a list of your horse's **normal** ranges of pulse, temperature, respiration and capillary re-fill time handy with the Vet's number, so you have something useful to tell your Vet. Know what supplies you need to have on hand to care for your equine friend.