

How to Take Your Horse's Vital Signs

UTCVM LARGE ANIMAL EMERGENCY & CRITICAL CARE

In an emergency, being able to take your horse's vital signs will enable you to communicate important information to your veterinarian. There are three main vital signs: Heart Rate, Respiratory Rate, and Temperature. These are often referred to as the TPR. (Temperature, Pulse, Respiration). Evaluation of your horse's mucous membranes also provides important information about your horse's health.

Heart Rate – Normal 24-48 beats per minute

There are two ways to obtain your horse's heart rate.

- 1) Listen to the heart directly. You can buy an inexpensive (less than \$10) stethoscope at your local drug store. The best place to listen to the heart is just behind the elbow. The heart can be heard on either side, but is often louder on the left side. When you listen you will hear a lub and then a dub sound followed by a pause. The lub and the dub together count as one beat. Listen for 15 seconds, count the beats and multiply the number times four. At your next vaccine or routine health care appointment have your veterinarian help you hear the heart and accurately count beats.
- 2) Feel the pulse. The two easiest places to do this on the horse are under the mandible or in the fetlock region.
 - a. To find the facial artery under the mandible, find your horse's masseter or chewing muscles on the side of his head (commonly referred to as the cheek). Run your hand down to the bottom and feel the edge of the mandible. You will feel a tubular structure snap under your fingers. This is the facial artery and vein. Once you have found them, lightly rest your fingers on the artery and feel it pulsing. It is important not to push too hard, as you will close off the vessel and not feel anything. One pulsation is equal to one heartbeat.
 - b. To find the digital artery in the fetlock region, take your fingers and feel from the back of the fetlock toward the front. You will feel a small tubular structure snap under your fingers. These are the digital vein, artery, and nerve. Once you have found it, lightly rest your fingers over the structure to feel the pulsing. One pulsation is equal to one heartbeat.



Close up of proper stethoscope position.



Dr. Graves obtaining a heart rate.

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Respiratory Rate – Normal 8-24 breaths per minute

There are two places to take your horse's respiratory rate.

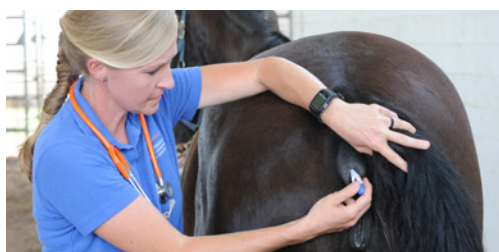
- 1) One way to take the respiratory rate is to watch your horse's nostrils. Count each time they flare. Each flare is one breath.
- 2) You can also watch your horse's flanks and count the number of times they go in and out. Each time is one breath.



Dr. McCracken taking a respiratory rate by watching the movement of the flanks.



Dr. Graves taking a respiratory rate by watching the nostrils.



Dr. Graves taking the temperature. Notice her standing safely to the side of the horse.

Temperature – Normal 98-101F

A horse's temperature is taken rectally. You can use a digital thermometer that can be purchased at your local drug store. Gently lift your horse's tail and place the thermometer in the rectum. Hold it there until it beeps and then read the temperature on the display. Make certain to keep hold of the thermometer and stand to the side of the horse.

Mucous Membranes – Normal = light pink color

To evaluate your horse's mucous membranes lift the upper lip. The normal color is light pink. Check your horse when he or she is healthy so you know what color is normal. If the mucous membranes become dark pink, red, or purple, this can be an indication of a serious health problem and you should call your veterinarian.

Summary

- Having your veterinarian help you learn these techniques during a routine appointment will make you comfortable and better able to use them during an emergency.
- Once you know how, take your horse's vitals regularly so you know what is normal for him or her.
- If your horse seems off or not quite right, checking heart rate, respiratory rate, temperature, and mucous membranes is a good way to quickly evaluate for a more serious problem.
- Abnormal vital signs are a reason to call your veterinarian. Being able to check your horse's vitals enables you to play an active role in your horse's health.



Dr. McCracken lifting the upper lip to evaluate the mucous membranes.



Normal light pink mucous membranes.