Recognizing Possible Problems

The horse’s natural behavior, the flight-or-fight response, the herd instinct, and its unquenchable natural curiosity, make the horse accident prone. The most common emergencies are cuts, lacerations, bruises and abrasions. Owning a horse, you may also face colic, foaling difficulties, acute lameness, seizures, and illness.

As a horse owner, it is helpful to know how to recognize signs of possible problems, how to safely stabilize your horse, and when to call your veterinarian. The key is to be prepared. Horses exhibiting violent pain often have a serious problem.

If your horse shows signs of violent pain call your veterinarian!

In a developing emergency, symptoms may be subtle and easy to miss, so observe your horse carefully.

Consult with your veterinarian if in doubt.

If your horse shows signs of violent pain, call your Veterinarian!

Signs of Possible Problems

- Not drinking water
- A horse that’s “off feed”
- Looking at the flank
- Any sign of distress, anxiety, or discomfort
- Lying down and getting up carefully
- Appears lifeless, drooping head, depressed
- Weight loss
- Unable to gain weight regardless of change in diet
- Decreased appetite
- Watery diarrhea
- Absence of gut sounds
- “Tying up” - a form of muscle cramps that range in severity from mild stiffness to life-threatening

A check of your horse’s vital signs will help confirm your suspicions.

Temperature, Pulse, Respiration are Key Indicators

See page 2
# Vital Signs

Key indicators of your horse’s health. Ask your veterinarian to help you learn to assess them.

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<th>Normal</th>
<th>How to Assess</th>
<th>When to Be Concerned</th>
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<td><strong>Heart rate</strong></td>
<td>30-42 beats per minute</td>
<td>Take pulse where the facial artery passes under the lower jaw. Using two fingers, locate the artery, count number of pulses for 15 seconds, multiply by 4 to obtain pulse rate.</td>
<td>Pulse rate sustained over 60 bpm when horse is cooled down and calm.</td>
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| **Respiratory rate** | 20 to 30 breaths per minute.  | When listening to the lungs, most noises should be heard over a 3 to 4 inch section of chest wall. Place a stethoscope 5 inches behind and 7 inches above the elbow. You should hear gentle blowing sounds, similar to someone blowing on a hot drink. Listen for unimpeded airflow. | Signs of congestion: Loud sounds heard over a large chest area. Bubbling sounds, similar to someone blowing through a straw into a liquid.  
  - A high-pitched squeak  
  - Silence |
| **Temperature**      | 99.5 to 101.5 degrees F.      | Lubricate an equine thermometer, partially insert into horse's rectum, tilted slightly. Hold for a full minute, wipe clean and read. | Temperatures over 103' F indicate a serious disorder, contact your veterinarian immediately. |
| **Mucous membranes** | Pale pink                     |                                                                              | Bright red, white, or bluish-purple                         |
|                      |                               |                                                                              |                                                             |
| **Capillary refill time** | 1 to 2 seconds              | Briefly press a thumb against your horse's gums. Gums should turn white, then pink, in no more than 2 seconds. | over 5 seconds                                             |
| **Hydration**        | After "pinch test", the skin flattens immediately. | Pinch Test - pinch your horse's neck pulling up, skin should flatten immediately. | If the skin stays "tented", the horse may be dehydrated. |
| **Gut sounds**       | You should hear a lot of gurgle noises. | Listen in the area behind ribcage. | Be concerned if you do not hear anything.                   |
| **Feces**            | Small, firm fecal balls.      | Watch for sand or parasite larva. | about sand colic                                           |
| **Pain level in stomach** | None                        | Any sign of abdominal pain | about sand colic                                           |