

Vital Signs


Do you know your horses vital signs?

Horses have a narrow range for all vital signs. Any deviation from the 'normal' is suggestive of some problem the body is having to deal with. This is why it is important for you to know your horses vital signs when they are not experiencing problems to allow early detection should they become unwell.

Heart Rate (HR) is commonly measured in horses by placing a stethoscope behind the left elbow, listening for 30 seconds, and doubling the count for beats per minute. A typical adult horse has an HR of 36-40 bpm; fit horses may have lower rates, while ponies are usually higher. Concern arises if HR approaches 60 bpm, as pain, illness, or heart issues can increase it. Knowing your horse's usual HR is helpful. Consider buying an inexpensive stethoscope to monitor it regularly. Taking a pulse by feeling an artery is possible, but measuring HR with a stethoscope is simpler.



Checking the heart rate

DO YOU KNOW YOUR HORSES NORMAL VITAL SIGNS?		
Heart rate is 28-44 beats per minute	Respiratory effort is minimal	Clear and bright eyes
Respiratory rate is 10-14 breaths per minute		Temperature should be 36.5-38°C
Moist formed dung	Pink and moist gums	No coloured nasal discharge

Respiratory rate (RR) - This parameter can be measured with nothing more than a watch. Simply watch the chest of your horse and count in a similar way to the heart rate above. A normal RR should be around 8-15 breaths per minute. A horse's respiratory rate will increase when it is in pain, out of breath after exercise or because of lung disease such as equine asthma.

To check your horse's **hydration**, lightly pinch the skin on the upper eyelid; it should snap back instantly, if it stays up, dehydration may be present. Note that a 'skin tent' can also occur after sweating, so test at rest. Gut sounds are another indicator, hearing some is generally positive, though interpreting them correctly requires experience.

Mucus membrane colour and refill time are quick tests to assess blood circulation. In horses with anaemia or shock, the membranes appear pale or white, and blood takes over two seconds to return after pressing on the gums. Familiarize yourself with your horse's normal colour, as it varies by breed, cob types tend to be paler than Arabs or Thoroughbreds. However, all breeds should have a refill time of less than two seconds.

To measure a horse's **body temperature**, use a rectal thermometer. While this doesn't cause pain, the horse may react if it's unfamiliar. Non-contact infrared thermometers (NCITs) aren't accurate for horses and should not be used. Normal temperature ranges from 37.5–38.5°C; readings below 37°C may result from contact with faeces. If your horse appears healthy otherwise, this is not a concern. If your horse's temperature is 38.5°C or higher, contact your vet.



It's important to have a good 'base line' for all the above parameters as any change can indicate a problem. If you have any concerns, please get in touch with your vet straight away.