

How to monitor competition fitness

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Judging your horse's fitness for competition means taking into account several different factors. Your horse needs to be physically (cardiovascularly and musculoskeletally) and mentally fit. Good health and fitness at home encompasses everything from excellent dental care, farriery and good nutrition through to exercise suited to the level of competition.

Rider fitness is also crucially important to consider as this has a big impact on the horse. A hot topic over the last couple of years is rider weight and what is an acceptable limit for each type and breed of horse. This is an ongoing area of research and for now there is no clear agreement on what constitutes 'too heavy', but it goes without saying that an overweight rider puts more weight down through the frame and joints of the horse. This added weight will make the horse work much harder compared to a horse carrying a smaller weight.

Many competition riders will have a system in place, whereby their vet performs regular checks



Central Equine Vets brand ambassador Evelyn Orr with Rosie demonstrating a balanced, tidy jump.

which include a full exam to auscultate the chest and monitor any changes in heart rate, rhythm and to identify any respiratory disease/airway abnormalities. An early sign of poor fitness or ill health may be a consistently elevated heart rate above normal for the horse. Generally, a rate of 36-40 beats a minute for an adult horse would be considered normal. However, just like human endurance athletes, fit horses will have lower heart rates e.g. 26-30. Heart rate can therefore be a useful indicator of health and fitness.

Any areas of change e.g. swelling or heat are also noted. The horse will then be observed in hand/ridden. The leading cause of poor (competition) performance in the horse is musculoskeletal disease. With frequent health checks, these issues can be detected, investigated and treated early, meaning less time lost from competition. Routine blood samples can be taken every few months to monitor any trends, e.g. recovery from inflammation.

It is important to not forget routine healthcare such as



Central Equine Vets Matthew Hanks taking the horse's resting heart rate

vaccination and dentistry. Depending on individual requirements, these may need to be timed to ensure appropriate length between drug administration and competition. For instance, the horse may not compete under rules for seven days following the administration of the vaccine. It is also worth remembering that you may have a horse prone

to soreness post-vaccination. Adequate time must be left to ensure your horse is back to normal before work begins again. If your horse requires sedation for shoeing or dentistry, then you must also factor this into your schedule to ensure you are 'legal' to compete, i.e. the drugs used are out of your horse's system. Your vet will be able to advise on detection times for medications used. Many riders try to tie vaccination and dentistry into the 'down-time' between competitions for this reason. With regards to dentistry, maintaining a comfortable, pain-free mouth means a much better chance of obtaining a soft, relaxed contact when riding – an important aspect particularly for dressage horses.

A young horse will tire more easily when first competed and this can be completely normal until he adjusts to the atmosphere (mentally very stimulating) and develops strength and fitness for his job. From a veterinary perspective for any equine, we like to ensure a varied workload, ideally with plenty of turnout and time outside of the arena.

A period of box rest or limited exercise will result in lowering of cardiovascular fitness and muscle fitness/strength. These horses will take longer to get back to full fitness and this time period should not be rushed.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your own horse's fitness for competition, contact us at Central Equine Vets on 0131 664 5606 for more information. From 1st February 2020 we have been offering two new health plans specifically for the competition horse. Please contact us for more information.



Cheek teeth showing sharp enamel points where they are in contact with the cheek – this can cause irritation and ulceration



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