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## How-To Perform a Basic Physical Examination

### **What You Will Need**

You will need a stethoscope, a rectal digital thermometer, and a watch with a second hand or your phone as a timer. You should ensure that your horse is properly restrained for your safety. For some horses being cross-tied is adequate restraint, but some horses may require you have a helper holding a lead rope while you perform an examination. There are benefits to examining your horse regularly, even when they are perfectly healthy. Your horse will get used to basic physical examination, and you will know their normal vital parameters. For example, you may take your horse's heart rate and note that it is 44 bpm. While this is not very high, you also know that when you check your horse's heart rate regularly it is usually around 32 bpm. This is a high heart rate compared to your horse's normal, and you may not have known this if you didn't perform regular examinations.



Before touching your horse, observe their behavior. Note if they are acting like their normal self or if anything is different or new. Are they eating? Are they drinking? Pay attention to their urine and manure production as well, noting both the amount and consistency. Are they showing signs of pain such as pawing, laying down, or looking at their side? Are they friendly and do they walk up to you, or do they stand in the back of the stall ignoring you?

### **Temperature**

A horse's temperature is measured rectally. Normal values range from 99.5F-101.5F. Place a small amount of lubricant on the tip of the thermometer, and approach your horse while standing on their side. Do not stand directly behind your horse, as they may kick out. Simply lift their tail with one hand and insert the tip of the thermometer into the anus with the other, lightly pressing the tip of the thermometer to the side of the rectal wall for the most accurate value. If your horse is nervous, scratching near the tailhead may help distract and relax them.



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### **Pulse**

Your horse's heart rate can be measured a few different ways. Most horse's resting heart rates should be between 32-44 beats per minute. Heart rate increases with excitement, nervousness, and pain. The most direct way to take a heart rate is to place your stethoscope between the horse's elbow and chest on the left side of the body. Count heart beats for 15 seconds, and then multiply that number by 4 to obtain beats per minute.

If you don't have a stethoscope handy, you may be able to feel the heart beating by placing your hand where you would place the stethoscope. You can also feel for the facial artery which crosses the bottom side of the lower jaw in a small notch towards the throatlatch.

### **Respiration**

Respiratory rate can be taken by simply observing the horse breathing, watching their abdomen move in and out. You can also place your hands in front of the nostrils and count the breaths you feel. Similar to heart rate, count breaths for 15 seconds and then multiply by 4 to obtain breaths per minute. Normal respiratory rate is between 12-20 breaths per minute. Also pay attention to the effort associated with breathing. Are the nostrils flared, is there noise associated with breathing?

### **GI Sounds**

When listening to your horse's abdomen, you should hear gurgling and rumbling. Use your stethoscope and listen on both sides of the abdomen, and listen up high and down low. If you don't have your stethoscope, you may even hear normal sounds by pressing your ear close to the abdomen. High pitched pinging sounds, or a complete lack of sounds are abnormal and should be discussed with the vet, in combination with the rest of physical examination findings.

### **Mucus Membranes**

Healthy gums in a horse should be pink and moist. When you press down with your finger to leave a pale spot, the color should return to pink within 2 seconds. Mucus membranes that are dry, have a prolonged refill time, or are discolored (pale, yellow, purple, dark) are all abnormal and can signify something serious going on.