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When should I call a vet? This is a question I hear often, especially for my large animal patients, because—let’s face it—calling a vet isn’t always an option when you’re sitting on a summer trail ride or waiting for your turn to show at the county fair. The goal of this article is to give you a few parameters to decide what is “normal” and what isn’t when it comes to overall equine wellness. *If at any point you feel your horse may be in immediate physical danger, please do not rely on these published normals as an indicator of whole body health. Contact your veterinarian immediately for a full physical exam and assessment.*

Body normals:

Heart rate: Did you know that a horse’s heart rate ranges from the mid 20’s to low 40’s beats per minute? For comparison’s sake, an athletic human’s heart beats an average of 70-80 beats per minute. A horse’s heart can be best auscultated, or listened to, on the left side of the chest, deep up and under the left armpit (or axilla). In lean animals, the pulse can sometimes be felt with your hand, but be careful not to count your own beats! An elevated heart rate in a horse can signal stress, nervousness, pain, colic, and/or dehydration.



Temperature: A horse’s temperature is best taken rectally, preferably with a flexible digital thermometer. Normal ranges are 98-100.5F depending on ambient temperature and activity level. Elevated body temperatures can indicate heat stress, infection, inflammation, or stress and should be taken seriously. If your horse maintains a body temperature over 100F despite stopping activity, standing in shade, having a fan placed in the stall, or is accompanying any systemic signs of illness, call your veterinarian right way.

Trauma: One of my favorite professors taught our class that a horse’s 2 main goals in life are “homicide or suicide”. If you’ve owned horses for any length of time, you’ll know exactly what I mean. We don’t know how they do it, but they hurt themselves in the darnedest ways! The severity of traumatic injuries can be difficult to judge in the field, but preventing further contamination of a wound by sterile bandaging (clean diapers work as great hoof bandages!) and ensuring your horse’s tetanus vaccinations are up to date are a couple of easy ways to give the best possibility of a good outcome.

Vaccinations: Speaking of vaccines, vector borne illnesses are on the rise in our area! Horses should be vaccinated for rabies, tetanus, and a host of other vector borne and viral illnesses at least 1-2X yearly. Some vaccines are considered core (all horses should have them every year), and some are considered lifestyle (for horses who show at large events, travel, or board). Most horse owners choose this yearly vaccination time to float teeth, wash sheaths in geldings, update Coggins testing or Equine Passports/health certificates, and get a thorough checkup to catch small health problems before they become big ones.

It’s worth mentioning that while this article gave you parameters for “normal”, these values can vary based on age, fitness, and level of work. The best way to assess what is “normal” for your horse, is to KNOW your horse. Check these values on your horse a few times, at various times of day, and record your “normals” in a journal or farm book for quick reference in times of need. This can be valuable information for your veterinarian and ultimately, the animals are the ones that benefit when owners and doctors work together.

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