



Eventing USA is proud to have ThorTurf Equestrian Surfaces as the sponsor of our horse health column "While You're Here, Doc", in which Dr. A. Kent Allen, DVM answers your questions about veterinary issues.

Know Your Horse's Vital Signs

Keeping Your Event Horse Healthy and Happy Starts with Basic Veterinary Knowledge

By Scott Wilson, DVM • Photos By Josh Walker

Knowing how to take your horse's vital signs is an essential part of monitoring your horse's health. Being able to track changes in pulse, respiration rate, temperature, hydration level and intestinal sounds

just might save your horse's life.

Vital sign monitoring is especially important for the event horse in order to supervise fitness levels. At a CCI or CIC competition vital signs are checked during

the in-barn inspections and in the vet box after cross-country. It is important that you understand what the vet is looking for and how to tell if your horse is within normal range.

Heart Rate

Normal heart rate for a horse at rest is 25-45 beats per minute. Ponies may have a slightly faster normal heart rate. An exercised horse may have a heart rate in the 60's, or higher depending on the level of exercise.

The most accurate way to quantify your horse's heart rate is by using a stethoscope to listen to individual beats over a minute's time. This can best be done on the left side by placing the head of the stethoscope just inside of your horse's elbow. Pushing the stethoscope head as far forward and up as possible usually yields the most audible heart beats.

If you do not have a stethoscope, checking your horse's heart rate can most readily be performed on the facial artery. This is performed by placing one or two fingers on the bottom of the jawbone, just in front of your horse's jowl. Moving your fingers forwards and backwards will allow you to feel this artery, and then taking a 15 second count of beats to multiply by four should give you an accurate pulse rate.



Incorrect placement of the stethoscope.



Accurate placement of the stethoscope.

Respiration

Normal respiratory rate for a horse at rest is 10-15 breaths per minute. An exercised horse can be expected to have an increased rate, up to the 30's or more depending on the level of exercise.

Listening to your horse's lungs with a stethoscope is usually unrewarding in a healthy patient; lung sounds are usually only heard in a horse with significant respiratory disease. Quantifying your horse's respiratory rate can easily be done by placing your hand on the lower abdomen and feeling the horse expand its thorax and abdomen with each inhalation.



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Digital Pulse

A bounding digital pulse indicates inflammation within the foot. To check for the presence of a pulse, place your thumb on one side of your horse's fetlock and one to two fingers on the other side.



Hydration

To get a general idea of your horse's hydration status, checking the gums for moistness can easily be done. To find your horse's capillary refill time (normal is less than two seconds), simply apply pressure to the gum directly above a tooth for a moment, then count how many seconds it takes for the blanched gums to return to their initial color.



IM Injections

Correct placement for an intramuscular injection is defined by the area underneath my hand, as shown in this picture. Injecting too high or too low on the neck could result in depositing medications in potentially harmful areas. Also, be sure that the skin is free of dirt before inserting a needle.



Temperature



Taking your horse's temperature can most safely be done by standing beside the horse's hind leg (not behind it) and lifting the tail away from you to allow visualization. Normal rectal temperatures range from 99.5 – 101.5 F. Digital thermometers are fast, but may not provide as accurate readings as a mercury thermometer (which can take up to three to five minutes).

Gut Motility

To assess gut motility, listening with your stethoscope or your ear on the horse's abdomen for intestinal sounds should be performed on both sides in high and low locations. Normally, a loud, intense sound should be heard every 30 seconds, with some shorter and quieter mixing sounds in between.



About Dr. Scott Wilson:

Dr. Wilson is a 2009 Graduate of the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine in Blacksburg, Virginia. He achieved his undergraduate degree in Animal and Poultry Science with an Equine Emphasis from Virginia Tech in 2004. He presently works as an intern at Damascus Equine Associates in Mt. Airy, Maryland.

About the Model:

Cady's Punchline is a five-year-old Connemara gelding who is embarking on his eventing career at events around Area II. He is owned by Cady O'Daly Farm located in Lynchburg, Virginia.