

# Equine Physical Exam

In 1989 I asked an instructor of mine (Dr Joe Bartjes) what were the most essential skills to master in veterinary college. His response was "learn how to take a good history and perform a good physical exam."

Physical examination of the horse is one of the most valuable skills you can learn. It provides the basic information necessary to determine a horse's health status, whether a condition is urgent, and findings can be communicated over the phone. One does not need to be a veterinarian to perform a good physical exam on a horse. It is a key skill you should learn in this class.

Below are a series of pictures designed to make clear how to perform a physical exam on a horse. At the end is a form which you should fill out, on which you record findings of 10 physical exams which you perform. I encourage you to perform these on your own horses if you have horses, as well as on our horses here.

# Stethoscope 101

Make sure the ear pieces are pointed forward to fit in your ear canal properly



Check the pin hole in the head of the scope. When closed the diaphragm (flat side) will pick up the sound. This is for high pitched sounds



If you rotate the head, while holding the neck still, you will toggle between the bell (concave side) and the diaphragm. The bell will pick up sounds if the hole is open. This is for lower pitched sounds.



# Mucus Membranes

Lift the gums to check the mucus membranes. They should be pink, not blue, deep red, brick red, purple, yellow or white.



Push the membranes just above the gums to blanch them out blood vessels to check the capillary refill time (CRT). It should be less than 1.5 seconds



Pinch the skin on the neck (Dehydration test). It should spring right back. If not the horse may be dehydrated (or old, like me).



## Digital Pulses

Check the digital pulses behind the pastern and fetlock. These should be difficult to find and faint. If prominent ("bounding") they could indicate laminitis



## Pulse Rate

You can most easily check the horse's pulse rate by applying a stethoscope to the side of the chest, behind the elbow. Count beats (lub-dub = 1 beat) in 15 seconds and multiply by 4.



Lay the scope flat on the side of the chest. You may have to push it into the pocket behind the elbow.



Checking the pulse on the mandibular artery is possible, but not so easy if the horse is anxious and moving its head (not shown)

# Respiration

Horses at rest breathe slowly and subtly (about 8 -12 breaths a minute). A good way to measure respiration rate is to stand at the horse's head and to look down the horse's flank. You will see the caudal ribs swing outwards with each inspiration.

You can also place the stethoscope over the trachea to hear breath sounds as you observe breathing.

If you wish to listen to horses lung fields you can't ask a horse to breathe deeply. However, if you hold the nostrils shut the horse will not be able to breathe. (They can't breathe through their mouths). After holding it closed for a minute you can release and the horse will take several deep breaths. Generally the lung fields of a horse should have little sound if the horse is at rest and breathing normally.

# Gut Sounds

Check the top and bottom of the left and right rear quadrants of the horse's abdomen. You should hear active contractions (rumbles, like distant thunder), within a 2 minute period, at each quadrant. This may take a little time so be patient.

Top Left



Bottom Left



Top Right



Bottom Right



# Temperature

Horses are quite tolerant having their temperature taken, but be careful. The horse should be held by someone, cross-tied, or in stocks. Approach from the side, running your hand down the back.



Standing against the side of the horse you can push the tail to the side a few inches, which will expose the anus.



Gently insert a lubricated thermometer into the anus and wait for two minutes (if a mercury thermometer) or until it beeps. It is OK to reinsert it and wait longer to confirm the first reading.

