I. Healthcare for Florida Horses

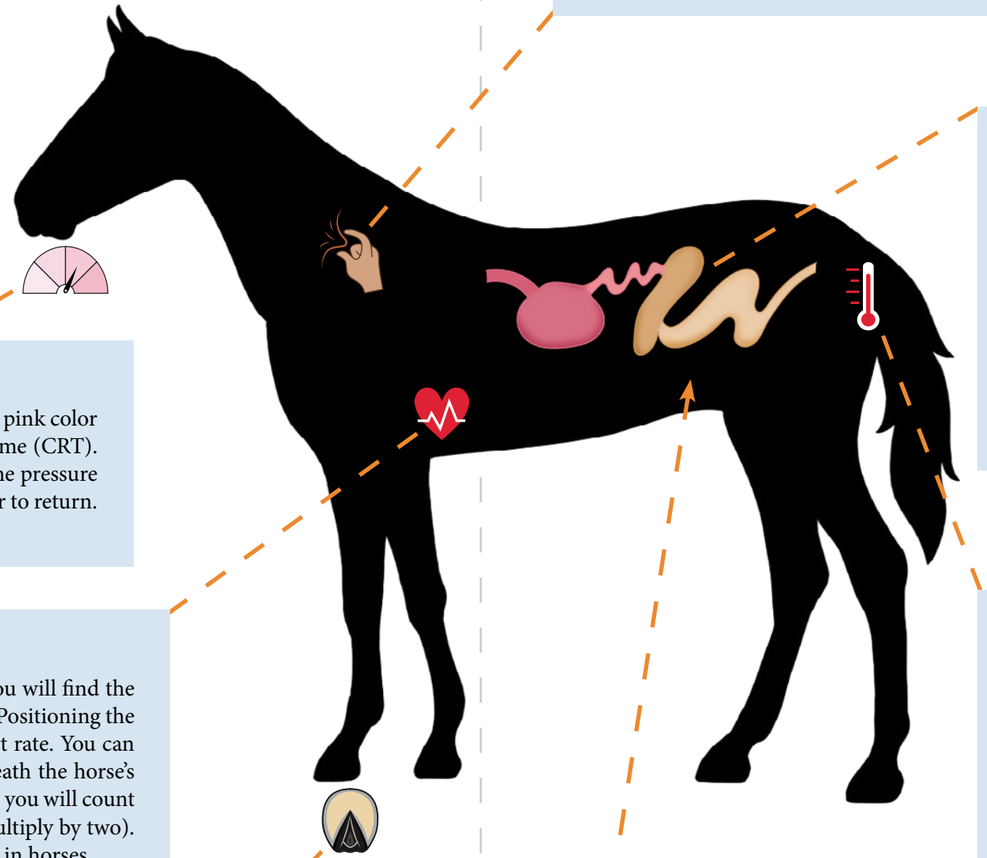
Physical Exam of the Horse

Learning how to take your horse's vital signs can help you detect when there is a problem and allow you to pass valuable information to your veterinarian in cases of emergency. Assessing the horse's vital signs generally includes checking TPR–Temperature, Pulse (heart rate), and Respiration–but additional, important components of a thorough physical exam are described below.

Stand back and observe: Recognizing the healthy horse

Begin the physical exam by studying the horse's appearance and demeanor. Does the horse look alert and comfortable, or lethargic and depressed? Next, look for any signs of pain or illness. Looking at the head, make sure the eyes are bright and that there is no discharge coming from the eyes or nose. Check how they are breathing, eating, defecating, and urinating. Also observe whether the horse's coat is shiny or dull.





Capillary Refill Time

To ensure proper blood flow, lift up the horse's top lip and look for a medium pink color on the gums. You can easily assess circulation by checking capillary refill time (CRT). Begin by pressing your finger against the gums for a few seconds. Release the pressure to reveal a white area, and count how many seconds it takes for the pink color to return. However many seconds you count is the CRT of that horse.

Pulse (Heart Rate)

To find the pulse, you can use a stethoscope to listen to the horse's heart. You will find the heart on the left side of the horse, behind the elbow and along the girth line. Positioning the horse's left foot slightly in front of the right can make it easier to get a heart rate. You can also find the heart rate by putting your fingers on the facial artery underneath the horse's jaw, or the digital artery at the back of the horse's pastern. For either location, you will count the number of beats you hear/feel for one minute (or for 30 seconds and multiply by two). Equine heart rate monitors can also be used to measure and track heart rate in horses.

Lameness

Lameness is defined as an asymmetry in gait, a problem with how the horse moves or stands. Lameness in horses has many causes including musculoskeletal injuries or hoof problems, neurological disorders, or pain and inflammation resulting from these or other conditions. To evaluate a horse for lameness, you should watch how the horse moves at the walk and trot. You should also watch how the horse trots in a circle and on a hard surface. Hoof testers can be used to apply pressure to areas of the foot to help detect and locate pain in the horse's feet.

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Skin Pinch Test

Perform a skin pinch test to monitor the hydration status of the horse. Choose an area of skin where the neck ties into the shoulder. Use your thumb and point finger to gently pinch some skin and hold it out away from the horse's body for a few seconds. Let go, and wait for the skin to fall back in place. If it does not fall back in place within two seconds, this may be a sign of dehydration.



Gut Sounds

To help assess whether your horse's gastrointestinal tract is functioning normally, one can use a stethoscope or their ear to listen to gut sounds (periodic gurgling sounds heard as food is moving through the digestive tract). Lack of gut sounds or extremely active gut sounds may indicate a problem particularly when taken in context with other vital signs and general observations of the horses' appearance and behavior. For example, a horse experiencing colic may produce little to no manure for some time, have little to no gut sounds, have an elevated heart and respiration rate and show other signs of discomfort, such as getting up and down frequently, pawing, looking at its sides.

Temperature

Taking a rectal temperature is the best way to determine if your horse has a fever. Digital thermometers are the easiest to use and can be purchased inexpensively from an equine tack/veterinary supply catalog or your local pharmacy. First, cover the end of the thermometer with lubricant (e.g. medical jelly). Standing close to the horse's left side at the hindquarters, hold the tail to the side to reveal the anus. Carefully insert the thermometer and rotate it as you push it in about two to three inches. Wait up to one minute until the reading is finished.

Respiration

Respiration increases during exercise and discomfort or pain, and decreases when the horse is at rest. The best way to assess respiration rate is to watch the horse's flank. As you watch the flank rise and fall, count each rise and fall as one breath. The number of breaths you count in one minute will give you the horse's respiratory rate.