

# Recognizing the Healthy Horse

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Every horse owner should evaluate their horses each day. The daily examination will in fact be a cost-free analysis of your horse. Every day in the life of horse ownership, we must use our keen observation to make sure that the quality of life for our horse(s) is maintained at the highest level. It is imperative that we develop a systematic daily routine that will help keep our horses as healthy as possible. The once over examination costs us nothing and in most cases will save our horse from extreme danger if left unattended. Spotting problems early will result in prevention of potentially damaging and expensive ailments.

Every horse owner should have a routine to evaluate the relative condition, movement, appetite and posture of their horse, since each has a definitive effect on your horse's state of health. The understanding of the body condition scoring system as developed by Texas A&M University, evaluates several locations on the horses body where fat deposition exists. The scale is from 1-9 (1=emaciated and 9=obese). Most of our pleasure horses should be in the 5-7 range. If you can see the horses bones easily, especially over the ribs it is likely that the horse is energy deficient and needs more feed intake. Also, a horse that is having some health problem such as bad teeth or parasites may be influencing his external appearance. Does the horse have a shiny coat and feel smooth and silky? Even as winter approaches and hair coat gets longer the coat should maintain a certain visual shine and a smooth, silky feel to the touch. Horses with rough hair coats are often trying to tell us that they have internal parasites, bad teeth or some other health related problem.

Further, does the horse move true to form with no lameness or dragging of toes? Is your horse standing squarely on all four feet? If you see any abnormal movement or posture (i.e., like a saw-horse stance) look further for cuts, abrasions, digital pulse, swelling and/or pain.

Monitoring eating behavior, dental condition, feed and water quality will aid you in seeing things that may be abnormal. Using keen observation and knowing the normal temperature, heart rate, respiratory rate and

capillary refill time are all important things for the horse owner to evaluate to establish baseline values for their horses. The normal temperature is between 99-100.5 degrees F; while heart rate and respiratory rates should be around 30-40 beats per minute and 8-16 expirations per minutes respectively, in the normal adult resting horse. Capillary refill time tells you if the blood's oxygen carrying capacity is altered. One should press their thumb against the gum above the teeth, then release and count the seconds until the white spot returns to the pink gum color. The change in color should only take one to two seconds. Pinching the skin on the neck or shoulder between your thumb and forefinger may give you an indication of hydration in your horse. A raised skin that stays up for more than two seconds may indicate dehydration. Palpation of the body and legs will aid you in detecting raised areas, bumps, scrapes or cuts. Don't be afraid to touch your horse!

You just need to "read" your horse and become confident in your ability to understand what is normal or abnormal that will allow you to reduce the frequency of injuries and other health care problems. Work with your equine veterinarian or other health care professionals to aid you in understanding all the things you should look for daily and help you establish appropriate deworming, dental and vaccination programs.

Continually use keen observation each day to evaluate and determine changes from the normal for your horse.



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