

SICK AND INJURED HORSES GUIDE

Adapted from the NFACC Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Equines (2013)

The following are normal ranges for vital signs in horses and donkeys when at rest and relaxed:

Adult horses:

Heart rate	28-44 beats per minute
Respiration rate	10-14 breaths per minute
Rectal temperature	37°C-38.5°C (99.5°F-101.3°F)

Foals:

Heart rate	60-110 beats per minute
Respiration rate	25-60 breaths per minute
Rectal temperature	Increases for first 4 days and plateaus at 37.2°C-38.6°C (99°F-101.5°F)

Adult donkeys:

Heart rate	36-68 beats per minute
Respiration rate	12-44 breaths per minute
Rectal temperature	36.2°C-37.8°C (97.2°F-100°F)



Young donkeys (up to 2 years):

Heart rate	36-68 beats per minute
Respiration rate	12-20 breaths per minute
Rectal temperature	36.5°C-38.9°C (97.8°F-102.1°F)

General:

The gums should be pink and moist and should return to that color within 2 seconds of pressing with your finger on the gum line above the teeth and then releasing (this is known as the capillary refill time).

Signs of a sick or compromised horse:

- Change in behaviour (e.g., lethargic, depressed, anxious)
- Reduced feed intake
- Change in water intake
- Change in consistency of manure
- Unexplained change in weight (gain or loss)
- Signs of pain or discomfort
- Signs of colic
- Lameness
- Swelling (e.g., of the lymph nodes)
- Discharge from the eyes, ears, or nose
- Coughing or difficulty breathing
- Fever



Signs of pain and discomfort:

- Increased rate of respiration
- Sweating with minimal physical exertion
- Reluctance to move

Signs of colic:

- Repeated lying down, rolling, and getting up, or attempting to do so
- Turning the head toward the flank
- Kicking or biting at the belly
- Pawing at the ground
- Stretching out as if to urinate without urinating
- Depression and/or loss of appetite
- Diarrhea or any change in manure output
- Sweating with minimal physical exertion

Signs of lameness:

Lameness is any alteration to the horse's normal gait, as a result of pain or discomfort.

- Change in willingness to move
- Head nodding
- Hip hiking



Signs of laminitis:

- Lameness (including a cautious, stilted gait)
- Increased heat in the feet and/or a bounding pulse in the feet (felt at the pastern or fetlock)
- Shifting weight to the hind end and front feet stretched out
- Reluctance to pick up feet

Signs of dental problems:

- Unexplained weight loss
- Quidding (dropping feed while chewing)
- Reluctant or slow to eat
- Unusual tilting of the head while chewing
- Unusually high amounts of long fibres in the manure
- Resistance to the bit or bridle due to pain
- Swelling in the cheeks of the upper or lower jaw
- Excessive salivation (drooling or slobbering)
- Unpleasant odour from the mouth or nostrils

Signs of parasitism:

- Poor body condition
- Rough hair coat (especially in foals)
- Weight loss
- Mild to moderate abdominal distension (“pot-bellied” appearance)



- Colic
- Diarrhea
- Stunted growth

Signs of toxicity:

From “Poisoning of Horses by Plants” (Copyright of the Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2016).

Different compounds or plants can cause a variety of symptoms in horses, including (but not limited to) the following:

- Drooling or frothing at the mouth
- Dilated pupils
- Weak, rapid pulse
- Convulsions
- Clamping of the jaw
- Weakness
- Fever
- Lack of coordination or a staggering gait
- Jaundice
- Paralysis