Recognizing the healthy horse

Mark Russell
University of Arkansas – Division of Agriculture

Keep in mind...

* All horses have personalities….
* Some are higher strung
* Some are more nervous
* The way they react to internal and external stimuli will vary

Beginning an examination

* How content/alert is the horse
  * Contented horses generally display calmness and alertness
  * At any given time a horse may be dozing
  * The horse’s state will depend on its routine
Beginning an examination

When observing the horse, one must note:
- Eyes
- Ears
- Posture
- Movement
- Other signs of irritability

Vital signs
- Temperature
- Pulse
- Respiration
- Mucous membranes
- Capillary refill time
- Skin pliability

Vital Signs

Temperature
- Average temperature is 100 to 101.5
- Temperatures of foals may be higher
- Factors that may affect temp:
  - Time of day
  - Age
  - Sex
  - Wind and precipitation
  - Level and intensity of activity
Pulse

- Foals will have higher pulse and respiration rates
- Normal pulse and respiration rates:
  - 45 to 60 beats per minute
  - 8 to 15 breaths per minute
- Fitness level has strong effect
- Respiration rate < pulse rate
  - "inversion" – can be a serious problem

Mucous membranes

- Inner eyelids
- Inside of the nostril
- Inner lips and gums

- Should be bright and moist/clear pink color
- Should not be dry or sticky
- Make note of unusual odors
Capillary refill time

- Firmly press the thumb against the upper gum for a couple seconds
- Should appear white, but return to normal color in approx 2 seconds
- If it takes longer than 3 seconds, check for dehydration

Skin pliability

- Pinch the skin on the side of the neck between the thumb and forefinger
- Skin should feel pliable, not leathery
- No sign of the fold should be apparent after 3 seconds

Other parameters – Body Fluids

**Feces**

- Adult horse should produce 28 – 50 pounds of fecal matter in 24 hr period
- 8 – 10 times per day
- Blood indicates a severe inflammation
- A dark, nearly black color occurs when the origin of the blood is in the anterior part of the digestive tract
- A red color is evident when the posterior part of the bowel is affected
Other parameters – Body Fluids

**Urine**
- Rarely clear
- Usually pale but can be a reddish yellow and still be normal
- 5 – 7 times in 24 hr period
- The amount will vary 4 – 7 quarts
- A distinct red color is sign of bleeding in the urinary tract
- A brownish color-green color is an indicator of jaundice and liver problems
- A dark brown coffee-colored urine is diagnostic for azoturia

**Tears**
- Moisture is important for protecting exterior surfaces of the horse’s eye
- Any obstruction will cause the tears to spill over and run down the face
  - May produce scabbing, loss of hair in this area and may attract flies
Other parameters – Body Fluids

**Sweat**
- Will sweat freely if there is a serious compromise in respiration, if they are excited, and from ambient heat and work.
- Horse may sweat profusely from extended exercise.
- Some may lose their ability to sweat.

Other parameters – Body Fluids

**Saliva**
- Function is to moisten the food to help with mastication and lubricate the upper digestive tract.
- Certain drugs, a variety of plants, defective teeth, foreign bodies, and some diseases will produce excess salivation.
- A partial or complete blockage in the esophagus will cause regurgitation of food and saliva from the nostrils.

Movement

- Should move in a cadenced manner.
- No jerky movements.
- Length of stride should be uniform.
- Will vary from breed to breed.
Hair coat
- Slick and shiny vs. poor hair coat
- Considerations
  - Season of the year
  - Whether the horse lives outside
  - Grooming practices
  - Parasite control
  - Medical history
  - Feeding program/nutritional supplements

Hoof condition
Ideally the hoof should be:
- Hard, with a slick waxy appearance
- Free of growth or fever rings
- The coronary band should not be dry and leathery
- The frog should be firm and slightly pliable
- Should be no odor or discharge