

What are the essential signs of ill health in horses?



What are the signs of a healthy horse?

The normal behaviour of individual horses varies to some extent so it is important that you know what is normal for *your* horse as well as what is normal behaviour for all horses.

Then you will notice when your horse is displaying abnormal behaviour which could be a sign that he or she is unwell.



A healthy horse will interact with other horses.

A healthy horse is alert and inquisitive, happy to interact with other horses (be sociable) and partakes of the normal herd behaviours such as mutual grooming sessions, sleeping for short spells throughout the day and night and running around occasionally (as a herd). A healthy horse will roll occasionally, especially when returned to the paddock after work. A healthy horse has a good appetite, is

forward going when being ridden with no signs of soreness or lameness. Individuals vary in how much they partake in certain behaviours - for example some horses are naturally more playful than others (geldings tend to play more than mares, but mares should still enjoy a run around).

A healthy horse will pass manure 8-12 times a day. The colour will vary depending on what the horse is eating. Urine should be either clear or cloudy; again the colour varies with the diet. Urine and manure should be passed without straining or signs of discomfort. Mares urinate more often when 'in season', especially if another horse is nearby.



Healthy horses are active and playful. They will run and play sometimes several times throughout the day.

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The coat of a healthy horse lies close to the body and shines. Some coat colours appear to shine more than others e.g. bays and blacks as opposed to greys and roans.

The eyes should be clear and clean and the horse should be alert when awake (however a relaxed horse may doze even when you are near).

It is quite normal for a horse to have a trickle of *clear* liquid in the nostrils.

What are the signs of an unhealthy horse?

- Standing around with the head low, even when movements of other horses and/or people would normally cause the horse to show interest.
- Not joining in with the herd when they carry out normal behaviours.
- Laying down more than normal or not at all.
- Tucking up of the flanks, this is where the area behind the ribs appears to be 'sucked in'.
- Excessively anxious behaviour, sweating. A horse should not be sweating unless there is a reason, for example if the weather is very hot and/or the horse has just worked, or has been running around the paddock.
- Looking at the flanks and/or pawing the ground, repeatedly getting up and down/rolling (all signs of abdominal pain).
- Yellow or green sticky mucus in the nostrils and/or eyes.
- Sudden unusual aggressive behaviour.
- If the coat is standing up then this usually means that the horse is ill and/or cold. The coat hair stands up in an attempt to trap air and warm the horse. In the short term the condition of a horse's coat is not really affected by illness however in the long term it is. A horse that has been ill/in poor condition for a long time will have a very poor, dry, 'staring' coat.



The coat of a healthy horse shines.



Standing with the head down can be a sign that the horse is not well - or the horse may just be dozing.

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- The horse may pass runny manure (or may not pass any) or strain to pass urine. The urine may be an unusual colour.

Basically any changes in normal behaviour should be investigated. If you think there is a problem and you do not know what it is then you need to call a vet.

How can you keep your horse healthy?

Prevention of ill health is better than cure, so it is important to:-

- Be observant learn to notice small changes in your horse. Constantly evaluate the appetite, body condition, coat, nasal discharge, faeces, urine and behaviour of your horse.
- Ensure that any horse facilities are safe, for example make sure that fences are kept in good order etc.
- Keep records of your horse's past injuries etc.
- Have a good routine of feeding, watering, exercise, worming, vaccinations (Tetanus and Strangles), hoof care and dental care and keep records of these.
- Know your horse's normal vital signs (body temperature, heart rate, respiration rate, hydration status, mucous membrane colour and gut sounds) so that if you suspect your horse is ill you can compare what is normal (for that horse) with your findings. If you do not know how to measure these ask your vet to show you how.
- Regularly check for lumps, bumps swellings, abrasions, cuts, sores and wounds, sore spots, hair loss and excessively itchy areas.



Have a good routine of feeding, watering, worming and vaccinations.

You need to know of a good horse vet and have their number in your mobile phone. As a horse owner you need to learn as much as possible about horse care but in particular you need to learn about colic, gastric ulcers, laminitis and the dangers of parasites ('worms') to your horse. Much can be learned about these conditions in good books, via reliable sources on the Internet and via your vet.

Prevention of ill health is better than cure. Learn to be super observant when checking your horse so that you can spot small problems before they become large ones.

See our publication [A horse is a horse of course \(2011\)](#) to learn about horse behaviour. A good knowledge of horse behaviour is essential for good horse management.

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