



Guide to conducting an equine health and welfare check

You should check the health and welfare of your horse or pony on a regular basis as this provides an opportunity to identify signs of injury or disease, enabling many potentially serious conditions to be picked up at an early stage and referred to a vet. You will also be able to reassure yourself that your equine companion is happy and experiencing a good quality of life. The equine health and welfare check presented here is based upon the one we use in our RSPCA equine centres.

Note that these checks in no way substitute for checks at appropriate intervals by your registered farrier, vet and qualified equine dental technician!

Before beginning the health and welfare check you should ensure that your horse is held or tied up securely with a suitably fitted head collar.

Physical checks

AREA TO BE CHECKED	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Body and coat condition	<p>Check for any places where the hair has worn away or the skin is damaged; this may suggest that a rug is rubbing or that the area is itchy for some reason (e.g. sweet itch, or the presence of lice or mites, the latter especially on the legs). Look for signs of skin nodules or growths on the inner thigh, belly, eyelids, udder, sheath and dock (under the tail), particularly in grey horses as these could be the beginnings of a sarcoïd or melanoma.</p> <p>The coat should be shiny and not dull. Look for missing patches of hair which could signify a skin fungus (such as ringworm) or an infection.</p> <p>Check for scurfy (flaky) skin and the presence of parasites or eggs in the coat and mane and tail.</p>
Eyes	<p>Look for signs of redness or swelling in the eyes and surrounding area and excessive discharge or crusting around the eye. Check for ulcers and cataracts, cloudiness which forms in the lens and which can develop as your horse ages.</p>
Ears	<p>Check for unusual sensitivity to touch on the ear and surrounding area which may suggest an infection or blockage of the inner ear.</p> <p>Check for the presence of ticks and other parasites. Some horses exhibit aural plaques; obvious whitish areas of flaky skin inside the ears. Often these are only a cosmetic problem and do not bother the horse; in some they can cause sensitivity around the ears.</p>
Nose	<p>The nose should be free of discharge, or at most a slight watery, clear discharge present. Any foul-smelling or bloody, yellowish, creamy-white or greenish coloured discharge is abnormal and you should consult your vet.</p>
Teeth/mouth	<p>Gently lift the upper lip of the horse and look at the gums above the teeth. They should be pink, shiny, moist and slippery. If they are pale, dry or tacky this can indicate dehydration. Colours such as pale white, brick red, yellowish, bluish or purplish are indicative of a serious problem; consult your vet immediately.</p> <p>Bad breath can be a sign of food collecting in the gaps between ageing teeth; this can lead to infection, therefore consult your vet.</p> <p>Check for any broken or damaged teeth.</p>

AREA TO BE CHECKED	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Capillary refill time	<p>This is a quick and easy test that provides a rough assessment of your horse's blood pressure and circulatory health. Press your finger on the gums above the horse's teeth; this will cause the area to blanch (turn white) as the pressure forces blood out of the surface capillaries (blood vessels). Now remove your finger and time how long it takes for the area to return to normal colour (as the capillaries refill). This should normally only take one to two seconds. If it takes longer than this, your horse may be suffering from low blood pressure due to shock, dehydration, poor heart function or other problems, therefore consult your vet.</p>
Legs/feet	<p>Run your hands gently up and down each leg looking for lumps, swellings, cuts, grazes or scabs that were not there before. Especially in wet weather check for signs of mud fever, hair loss, crusting or scabbing around the pasterns.</p> <p>Pick up the feet to check for trapped stones or grit and any heat you can feel in the feet. If you are concerned you might have found heat, compare with the horse's other feet to make sure there really is a difference in the foot you are concerned about. Clean out each foot using a hoof pick. Check the sole and frog to see if there are any soft or tender spots.</p> <p>Look at the outside of the hoof to see if there are any cracks appearing.</p> <p>Check for bad odour around the frog and evidence of a black colouration, which can be a sign of thrush.</p>
Movement	<p>Get a competent handler to lead the horse and look carefully for any lameness, stiffness in the limbs or any uneven left-right balance in their movement as they are walked and trotted towards, past and away from you.</p>
Dock/anus	<p>Gently lift the tail and check for signs of diarrhoea (scouring). Look for parasites, particularly ticks and any sign of yellow or white discharge from the anus which can be a sign of pinworm.</p>
Sheath/vulva/udder	<p>Check for unusual swelling, heat or discharge which may suggest infection. In lactating mares (those with sucking foals), check the udder for heat and hard areas which may suggest mastitis.</p> <p>Check for a build-up of dirt between the udders or inside the sheath. The sheath may need cleaning with a specialist cleaner in order to reduce the build-up of smegma, which can cause your horse great discomfort. Udders should be cleaned with warm, soapy water if necessary.</p>

Further useful information – physical

Droppings	<p>Droppings should be well-formed and ball-shaped but easy to break in half. If the balls seem extremely dry or hard, this can suggest that your horse is not drinking enough water. Soft (loose) droppings can mean your horse is eating a diet that isn't right for them, or that they have some sort of disease. If diarrhoea persists for longer than 24 hours, consult your vet. If a foal shows diarrhoea, consult your vet immediately.</p> <p>Always keep an eye out for worms in droppings. If you see these consult your vet regarding your worming regime as you may need to adjust this.</p>
Urine	<p>Regular passing of clear or lightly-coloured urine is normal. Short urination of dark-coloured urine suggests that your horse may not be drinking enough. Note that frequent urination is normal behaviour in mares coming into season. Always consult your vet if you are concerned about your horse's urination.</p>

AREA TO BE CHECKED	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Temperature, Pulse and Respiration (TPR)	<p>All horse people should know the values normal for the horse:</p> <p>Normal body temperature: 37.5-38°C.</p> <p>Normal pulse (at rest): 25-40 beats per minute.</p> <p>Normal respiration (at rest): 8-10 breaths per minute.</p>
<p>Take the time to watch your horse, either free in the field (preferably in the company of their usual field companions) or at rest in their loosebox. You should do this whenever you get the opportunity, in order to build a picture of your horse's normal behaviour. This means you will easily be able to spot any changes in behaviour away from normal which might indicate a problem.</p>	
<h2>Welfare checks</h2>	
General attitude	<p>Is your horse interested in their surroundings, reacting to your behaviour or that of their field companions?</p> <p>Unless they are resting or dozing, are their ears mobile, reacting to sounds as they occur, and do they raise their head to watch what's going on? If you call their name, do they look at or approach you?</p> <p>Horses with good welfare are alert and interested in their surroundings.</p>
Abnormal behaviour	<p>Does your horse perform any abnormal behaviours, such as crib-biting, wind-sucking, weaving or box-walking?</p> <p>These behaviours, called stereotypies, develop in horses experiencing unsuitable environments or diets. Once developed, horses often continue to exhibit some of these behaviours even if their management or diet has since improved (particularly crib-biting and wind-sucking). Therefore, if your horse performed these behaviours before you got them and became responsible for their environment and diet, this might not mean they have poor welfare now. However, if your horse starts to show any of these behaviours and hasn't done so before, you must change how you keep and feed them, as they are most likely indicators of poor welfare. Consult your vet or an accredited clinical equine behaviourist (see below).</p> <p>Note that behaviours such as crib-biting, wind-sucking, weaving or box-walking are sometimes called 'stable vices' by horse people. This is inappropriate, because it suggests the behaviours are the fault of the horse, rather than due to inappropriate management or feeding.</p>
Aggression	<p>Is your horse excessively aggressive to other horses, or to people? Although a limited amount of aggressive interaction between horses is normal behaviour and a normal part of equine life, horses with good welfare are rarely very aggressive to each other (or to people), and this is usually limited to non-contact threats.</p> <p>If your horse is continuously aggressive to other horses or people, or if they have suddenly become more aggressive, this can indicate a welfare problem. Consult your vet or an accredited clinical equine behaviourist (see below).</p>

AREA TO BE CHECKED	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Behaviour when ridden/driven	<p>Does your horse buck, rear, resist rein contact, run away with you, or swish their tail constantly when you are riding or driving?</p> <p>Do they seem to take a long time to learn something new?</p> <p>Some of these behaviours may be a result of discomfort, such as back or dental pain, which need to be ruled out through consultation with your vet. Research has shown that all of these behaviours, as well as slow learning or poor trainability can be due to poor welfare. In addition, giving conflicting signals when riding and driving horses, such as simultaneous 'speed up' leg and 'slow down' rein aids can cause your horse confusion and reduce their welfare. If you are having such problems consult your vet or an accredited clinical equine behaviourist (see below). In addition, the International Society for Equitation Science provide some really useful information on avoiding common problems in training and riding your horse here: https://equitationscience.com/equitation/principles-of-learning-theory-in-equitation</p>

If after conducting the health and welfare check you are concerned about anything you have found, consult your vet. For behavioural issues you can consult a qualified equine behaviourist, but they may require your vet to check there are no underlying health problems causing the problem first. You can find a list of vets at www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/findavet and a list of appropriately qualified equine behaviourists at <http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk>