

How to... take your horse's digital pulse

The digital pulse is a way to measure the blood flow going to the horse's hooves and can detect a problem before you see any signs of illness or lameness. When taking the digital pulse the strength of the flow is more important than the rate of beats or pulses.

Why take your horse's pulse

The pulse measures the strength of your horse's heartbeat. Normally, a resting horse has a pulse of 38 to 40 beats per minute. When exercising, a horse's heart rate can exceed 180 beats per minute.

A heart rate over 80 beats per minute can be a sign of a serious problem in a resting horse and a consistent rate of 60 beats per minute could indicate pain, excitement, or being afraid of something.

Knowing how to take a digital pulse in a horse is something every horse owner should be efficient at, you can often detect a problem by an increased or "bounding" pulse before you see any signs of illness or lameness.

Pain, inflammation, either local or systemic can cause an increase in blood flow to the hooves, therefore increasing the digital pulse often referred to as a "bounding" pulse rate.

How to take the digital pulse

The easiest way to locate them is to place your thumb on one side of the fetlock and your first 2 fingers on the other side.

Gently move your fingers toward the back of the fetlock, leaving your thumb in place. Keep pressing lightly as you move your fingers until you feel a pulse.

You should not use your thumb to feel for the horse's digital pulse as your own pulse can be felt through the thumb and a horse's pulse is slower than ours.

Make sure you use soft pressure as the arteries are quite small in diameter and too much pressure blocks them, making it very difficult to feel a pulse.

If you press too softly, you may not create enough resistance to feel the pulse at all.

Take your own wrist pulse, when you have found it then that is the sort of pressure you use to find your horses digital pulse.

It is important to check your horse's digital pulses in all 4 legs often. This will give you an indication of what is normal for your horse.

Doing this will enable you to tell if the pulse has increased in any hoof and if there maybe a need to call a vet.

A "bounding" pulse may be present in 1 or more of the digital arteries could be a sign on a health issue. Abscesses and laminitis for example can cause an increase in circulation to the hoof. You should consult your veterinarian.

NOTE: In young horses or foals the digital pulses should be easily felt. If weak or faint seek veterinary attention.



Where to find the digital pulse

Taking your horse's digital pulse is easy when you know where to find the digital arteries that run down each side of each leg, in the groove between the suspensory ligament and the flexor tendon.

There are 4 common areas to take the horses digital pulse.

1. Right above the collateral sesamoidean ligament.
2. Over the ligament.
3. Right below the ligament.

Midway down the pastern.

