

Knowing Your Horse's Behavior and the Importance of Recognizing Early Warning Signs

Many horse owners like to travel with their animals to compete or ride for enjoyment. Hauling long distances can be stressful on our animals. It is important to know what is normal for your animal, to recognize early warning signs of ailments and be prepared with an emergency medical supply kit. Checking on your animal frequently and being able to react quickly can avoid problems.

In early November, I traveled to Tulsa Oklahoma with my horse, Jackson, for the Color Breed Congress. Typically, when trailering Jackson a long distance, I give him a dose of Banamine, an anti-inflammatory, to keep him comfortable. When I unloaded him from the trailer, Jackson was not completely himself. He had not passed as much manure as normal, he was stomping his hind legs, and had his tail cocked to one side. I watched him carefully over the next few hours. After lunging him lightly to stretch his legs, he passed a normal stool and seemed more comfortable. As a precaution, I gave another dose of Banamine and paste electrolytes to stimulate drinking. Jackson seemed much better the next day and rode really well. He was excellent though out the first part of the week at the show. On Friday, Jackson was amazing in our 3 trail classes. He performed better than I could have ever imagined. However, during one of our breaks Jackson tried to lie down in his stall, with his saddle on. I also noticed that he was not passing as much stool as normal that day. I gave him more Banamine and electrolytes that evening and he rested comfortably. The next morning he seemed dull. His heart rate was slightly elevated at 60 beats per minute (bpm), normal resting heart rate for a horse is 40 bpm. Jackson had decreased gut sounds and had not consumed as much water as normal. I took him for a short walk and he passed more stool. However, when I started to practice showmanship he got uncomfortable and tried to lie down in the practice arena. Jackson was experiencing mild impaction colic. I knew I needed to react to his condition quickly before his symptoms got worse. I called the show veterinarian to aid in Jackson's treatment and to run blood work. We tubed him with mineral oil, gave more anti-inflammatories, electrolytes and I did some acupuncture points for pain and stomach relief. Luckily Jackson's blood work was all within normal limits. I scratched my first few classes that day and let Jackson rest comfortably in his stall. I took him for a walk outside in the sunshine and fresh air to stimulate his circulation. Early in the afternoon, Jackson passed normal, moist stool and his heart rate was down to 40 bpm and he had normal gut sounds. He was bright and alert and was nibbling at the small amount of hay in his stall. I did show him later that night and he was amazing. We won both horsemanship classes! Jackson rested comfortably that night and passed normal stool throughout the night. The next morning he rode great in our final class. We ended up reserve high point for the show. Best of all, Jackson was comfortable on the trailer ride home and is back to normal.

I am thankful that I recognized the early signs of Jackson's mild colic episode, and that I had initial supplies to treat his condition. I recommend having the following supplies in an emergency medical kit for your animal: Bute paste, Banamine paste, electrolyte paste, thermometer, stethoscope, and leg wrap material. Normal temperature for a horse is 99-101.5, normal heart rate is 40 bpm, and normal respiration is 20 breaths per minute. You can also check the hydration status of your horse by checking their gum color and moisture. If you press on the gums for about 5 seconds, the color should return to their gums in about 2 to 3 seconds. It is important to know the normal behavior of your animal, so that you will readily notice changes that indicate warning signs. The following links have more information on how to check horse's vital signs or recognizing colic signs.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTSrlqNP2mY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fw2FY7Dnw6U>

Checking your horses' vital signs regularly throughout stressful trips and competitions is important to keep them healthy and performing at their peak.