



February 2025 Newsletter

Equine Hearts



Horses are phenomenal athletes with huge hearts that rarely fail but unfortunately it is not impossible.

Horses' hearts have the same four chambers as us, and other mammals. However, they live far heart healthier lifestyles than us, so many of the cardiac diseases we see in humans are absent in horses.

A horse's resting heart rate is usually 28-44 beats per minute (bpm) with the majority 36-40 bpm.

A donkey's resting heart rate is 36-68bpm.

When we vaccinate or sedate horses or donkeys, we will auscultate their heart, usually from both sides. We are listening to the rate of the heart, for whether the heart sounds are beating in a regular rhythm and whether we can hear any additional sounds (murmurs).

High heart rates can indicate if an animal is stressed, exerting itself physically or in pain. In conditions such as colic, heart rate can be an indicator of how serious the situation is. For example, a heart rate of over 64 bpm is more likely to be surgical than a heart rate of 44.

As an animal gets fitter, their resting heart rate can drop, so it is useful if you know your horse or donkey's resting heart rate or pulse rate. If you get use to listening or taking a pulse, then it also means when your equine is unwell you can check their heart rate.

Heart rates and pulse rates should match. When a vet is listening to your horse's heart, they may also be feeling their pulse elsewhere at the same time, if the pulse doesn't match the heart rate that can be indicative of a problem.

You can see a horse's jugular pulse if you look at their neck. In a normal calm horse when their head is up this can come to about a third of the way up the horse's neck. When their heart is having to work harder this can go significantly higher. A jugular pulse over halfway up the neck is a concern and should be checked by a vet.

Heart murmurs are sounds produced by the turbulent flow of blood through the heart.

Limb swelling or swelling under a horse's abdomen can be a sign of later stage cardiac disease. However, there are lots of potential causes of this (please see our website for previous newsletter on limb swelling) so on its own doesn't mean the horse is in heart failure.



It is not uncommon for horses to have arrhythmias where their heart effectively skips a beat, this is called a heart block. The most common 2nd degree AV block occurs when a horse is at rest and has no clinical impact on the horse at all. It disappears when the horse is exercised.

If we hear an arrhythmia when we auscultate the horse's heart, we may recommend they have an ECG. All normal horses every hour will on average have two abnormal beats at rest, so it is important we record an ECG over an extended period of time.

Atrial fibrillation is the most common clinically significant arrhythmia in the horse. The horse will often have a high heart rate, and they can tire easily. It can be treated with medication or electro conversion under general anaesthetic. However, there is a risk they can revert back to atrial fibrillation with either treatment.

Heart murmurs are often not significant in the horse as their hearts are so large they can cope with a level of inefficiency. However, some are more significant, so we grade them 1-6 with 1 being very quiet and 6 being loud enough to hear with your stethoscope not touching the horse.

If your horse's murmur is grade 3 or above it is worth further investigation of your horse's heart to identify the cause. An ECG may also be recommended.

Practice News

Katherine has now started her maternity leave. We wish her the best of luck!

We welcome the very experienced Alex Thiemann to the team.

We will be starting the first course of sweet itch vaccine in February if you would like further information please give us a call.

Upcoming talks

Equine First Aid and a worming update at Chard Equestrian at 7pm on the 26th February, organised by West Dorset and District Riding Club please email info@swdg.org to book

Equine Dentistry at Downclose stables at 7pm on the 12th March, organised by BHS South West please book via the link on our facebook page



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