

Little Hooves 4-H Club  
Suffield, CT  
Miniature Horse Health Part I (The Normal Mini)

Before learning about what can go wrong, it is best to start out with what is normal in order to be able to recognize when things are not right. The vital signs and measurements listed below are a good start but the very first thing is just to observe the horse. They should be interested in food and activity around them, have a bright eye, and not display signs of pain such as pawing, rolling, or standing stretched out.

Vital signs for normal adult miniature horse at rest (big horses may be slightly different)	
Temperature	99- 101° F
Heart rate	32-44 beats per minute
Respiration	12-25 breaths per minute
Capillary refill time (gums)	<= 1.5 seconds

Temperature is taken with a rectal thermometer and can be higher after exercise, on a hot day, or in newborn foals. Digital thermometers are easiest to use. Before use, smear with some Vaseline to make it easier to insert. Tie the mini and stand near the hip so you can't get kicked. Push the button to turn it on, lift the tail and gently insert the thermometer up to the thick part, hold on, and wait until it beeps to read the temperature.

Heart rate (or pulse) is taken either with a stethoscope or with the hand. The easiest places to find a pulse are at the connection of the front legs to the chest, under the jawbone, or just behind the left elbow. Count the beats in 15 seconds and multiply times 4. A pulse rate of 100 beats/minute or more usually indicates extreme pain. A very weak pulse is also not good.

To measure respiration, count each time the horse inhales and ignore when they exhale. Again, count for 15 seconds and multiply times 4. Foals may have higher normal respiration rates than adults, as will horses that just ran around. There should be no extra effort or noise with breathing.

Capillary refill time is important to determine whenever a horse is not eating, so a baseline value is needed to know what is normal. This is done by lifting the upper lip and pressing firmly with your finger on the gum about an inch above the corner tooth. The gum should be a light pink color to start with but will turn white when pressed. Lift the finger and time how long it takes to return to pink. Gums that stays white or are a darker pink or purple color also indicate something is wrong. Some pinto minis (e.g. Princess) have multi-colored gums, which is why it is important to know what is normal for each horse.

Hydration: Horses can easily get dehydrated if they are sick, not eating, or not drinking enough water. If you pinch an inch of skin on the neck, pull it out and then release it, the skin should immediately bounce back. If it does not, it means the horse is dehydrated.

Gut sounds: Anytime a horse is not eating or producing manure normally, they should be checked for gut sounds. Normally the gut is very noisy and you can hear sounds with a stethoscope (or even your ear) from either side of the horse's belly behind the ribs. If you don't hear gut sounds on a horse that isn't eating, check capillary refill time and look for signs of pain such as rolling, standing stretched out, or looking at the side. These can be signs of colic and a veterinarian should be called.

Basic first aid kit:

Vet's phone number!!  
thermometer  
disposable gloves  
scissors  
eye ointment  
Betadine solution

gauze pads/alcohol  
stethoscope  
syringes and dosing syringes  
Banamine (paste and/or injectable)  
Nitrofurazone ointment  
ulcer medication (Ranitidine, Ulcergard)

Basic preventive care

Providing proper feed, shelter, turnout, water, a salt block and exercise are all important for maintaining health. Conditions as natural as possible are best, with forage (grass or hay) provided as often as you can because horses were designed to graze almost constantly. Shelter from wind, sun, rain, and snow does not have to be fancy but needs to be safe.

Monitoring body condition is critical with furry minis in the winter, as you must go by feel, not how they look! Feel the ribs, back, and hips to make sure they are covered with flesh, not just hair.

Worming: Horses need to be on a regular de-worming program to be kept free of internal parasites. Minis at On Target Miniatures are fed a daily wormer and wormed with a paste wormer (Ivermectin) twice a year. Members helped with the paste worming in the spring.

Vaccinations are a key part of preventive care. Always check with your veterinarian to learn what is currently needed in your area. Rabies vaccination is required here, plus Eastern and Western Encephalitis, Tetanus, West Nile Virus, and Rhino/flu vaccines are given. Intranasal strangles vaccine is given to show horses. Mares are usually vaccinated shortly before foaling so that the foal gets immunity through the milk until they are 4-6 months old. When veterinarians give vaccinations they can also draw blood for a Coggins test for Equine Infectious Anemia. A negative Coggins test is usually required for any travel out of state or entry in any horse show or event.

Oral health: Miniature horses need routine dental care in order to have healthy teeth and gums and chew food properly. Either a veterinarian or an equine dentist can provide this care, which often involves filing the teeth with instruments called "floats" that remove sharp edges.

Hooves: All horses, including miniatures, need to have their hooves trimmed by a farrier every 6-8 weeks in order for the hooves to grow properly. Hooves should be cleaned several times a week (daily is best) with a hoof pick and brush.

If other people will be caring for your horse, it helps to have a chart with their normal vital signs, phone numbers of vet(s) and farrier, and instructions in case of an emergency, along with emergency phone numbers. If you don't own a horse trailer, (or will be away) know who to call. In this area, Strain Family Horse Farm in Granby provides emergency transportation to Tufts (the nearest large animal hospital) for a fixed fee.

Program will provide an opportunity for members to pair up and take vital signs on project minis and record them. It will also be a good time to check body condition and practice giving oral medication (water only!).