

Chapter 1

Taking on Your Horse's Health

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing a healthy horse
 - ▶ Knowing the horse's mind and its connection to health
 - ▶ Doing horse care and exercising every day
 - ▶ Exploring equine nutrition and disease
 - ▶ Taking care of your horse through all stages of life
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If you're a horse owner, or a horse caretaker, you want your equine companion to be healthy. Nothing is sadder than seeing a magnificent creature like a horse feeling sick and uncomfortable. (If you've ever had a sick horse on your hands, you know what we mean.) In order to keep your horse healthy — both mentally and physically — you need to understand what makes him tick.

Horses need good preventative care and good nutrition. These two aspects of horse husbandry are more important than any other. If you can get these two right, chances are you won't have to deal with too many problems. Should illness strike, however, recognizing the signs of a problem early on can make all the difference.

In this chapter, we introduce you to the basics of horse health and nutrition. We show you the signs of health to look for in your horse, explain how to feed your horse and take care of him when he's sick, and walk you through all the stages of equine life.

Knowing the Traits of a Healthy Horse



You want your horse to be healthy. But knowing exactly what that means is important. Healthy horses have the following characteristics:

- ✓ **Normal temperature.** It should range from 99.5 to 101.4 degrees Fahrenheit.

- ✓ **Pink gums.** Look to see that your horse has moist, pink gums — not white, bluish, or dark red.
- ✓ **Gut sounds.** Your horse should have gurgling sounds coming from his rear abdominal area when you listen with a stethoscope or with your ear close to him.
- ✓ **Healthy manure.** Your horse's manure should be round and firm, not loose and runny, or dry.
- ✓ **Good appetite.** Your horse should be an enthusiastic eater.
- ✓ **Normal pulse.** When at rest, your horse's pulse rate should be 26 to 44 beats per minute. You can feel his pulse by placing your fingertips under his jaw.
- ✓ **Normal respiration.** When you count your horse's breaths, you should see 8 to 16 in one minute.
- ✓ **Relaxed attitude.** Under normal circumstances, your horse should be calm and relaxed, and not worried or agitated.
- ✓ **Bright eyes.** Your horse's eyes should be clear, bright, and open, without redness, swelling, or excessive tearing.
- ✓ **Shiny coat.** In the spring and summer months, your horse's coat should be glossy.
- ✓ **Right weight.** Your horse shouldn't be too thin or too fat.

You can find more details on how to determine your horse's health in Chapter 2.

Understanding the Equine Mind's Link to Health

In order for your horse to be truly healthy, she needs to be happy too. Science has discovered that the human mind is closely tied to the health of the body, and this appears to be true of horses as well.

How do you know whether your horse is happy? If you know equine body language, you don't need to have a conversation with your horse to get a sense of her frame of mind. In Chapter 3, we give you a description of equine facial expressions to help you determine your horse's attitude with a single glance. You also discover the special language of the horse and how to translate it.

The way horses see the world is an important key to providing them with an environment that will make them happy. As social creatures who become

stressed and lonely when kept on their own, horses thrive on companionship. They also frighten easily because of their long evolution as prey animals.

Grazing is an intrinsic part of the equine repertoire and is another aspect of their intrinsic design. Nature intended horses to eat for nearly 18 hours a day to allow them to take in enough nutrients to survive. Their digestive tracts need almost constant work to stay healthy. Providing horses with plenty of forage, served to them at least three times a day, is so important for this reason.

Movement is another requirement of the horse, and is also left over from the days when all horses were wild. Horses fending for themselves on the open range travel for many miles a day looking for food. As a result, the equine body developed to need plenty of exercise.



Thwart some of these natural urges in the horse and you can end up with behavioral problems in the form of stall vices. Cribbing, weaving, and pacing are just some of the few neurotic behaviors common in horses who can't handle not having what nature intended them in the way of diet, movement, and stimulation. (See Chapter 3 for a detailed description of these behaviors.)

Other less neurotic but no less troublesome behaviors can also result when horses aren't happy. Bucking, rearing, and excessive spooking are just a few. Finding out what's plaguing your horse and causing her misbehavior is key to solving the problem.

The Details of Routine Horse Care

Probably the most important component of horse health is routine care. Without the right care every day, your horse won't stay healthy. It's as simple as that.

Good horse care starts with choosing the right veterinarian. Picking a vet for your horse should be just as important as choosing a doctor for yourself. Ask other horse owners for referrals, interview the vet to get a sense of his or her bedside manner, and find out what kinds of services he or she offers.



Consider taking out insurance on your horse as well. Medical insurance for horses can go a long way toward helping you pay for an illness if it strikes.

Your horse should get an annual checkup, just like you do. During this exam, your vet checks your horse's teeth, gives him necessary inoculations, and checks his vital signs. He or she also asks you questions about your horse's diet, behavior, and general attitude, and assists you in figuring out whether your horse could benefit from a change in daily care.

The way you house your horse is another vital part of how you care for him:

- ✓ If you're boarding, choose a stable that's well-maintained, requires equine boarders to show proof of vaccination, and has a professional staff.
- ✓ If you plan to keep your horse at home, develop a daily routine for your horse to ensure his proper care. This routine should include feeding several times a day, watering, stall cleaning, grooming, hoof cleaning, and exercise.

Your horse's hoof care is tremendously important — “no hoof, no horse,” as the old saying goes. Find a qualified farrier through referrals from fellow horse owners or your veterinarian, and stick to a regular trimming and/or shoeing schedule.

Keep parasites at bay on a regular basis by practicing fly control, making your horse's environment inhospitable to mosquitoes, and deworming regularly.

Tooth care is important to your horse's health and well-being, too. Make sure that a veterinarian examines your horse's teeth at least once a year.

Flip to Chapter 4 for the full scoop on all these horse care tasks.

Exercising for the Best Health Possible

Exercise is incredibly important for your horse's health, and is something that many horse owners overlook. Horses who are stabled are in dire need of daily exercise to keep their joints, tendons, and muscles in good shape. Exercise is also a must for a horse's mental well-being.



Horses who aren't regularly exercised need to start out slowly as they build up their bodies. Warm-ups and cool-downs are exceptionally important, and should consist of at least 20 minutes of the horse's total exercise time each day.

Horse owners can exercise their horses in any number of different ways, including the following:

- ✓ **Turnouts:** These exercises allow the horse to roam at liberty in a large area and are important to every stabled horse's mental health.
- ✓ **Hand-walking:** This is another option and helps improve a horse's ground manners — as well as the owner's fitness!
- ✓ **Longeing:** This is another way to exercise your horse, and it can be used as part of a training program. It requires that you stand in the center of an imaginary circle while your horse moves around you at the various gaits. Warm-ups and cool-downs are especially important with this form of exercise, which shouldn't be overdone because it can be hard on a horse's legs.

✓ **Riding:** If you like to ride (and you probably do if you're reading this book), getting on your horse and exercising her this way is most likely your best option. Make sure that you have a saddle that fits your horse properly, and slowly work your horse up to a good fitness level if you haven't been riding her regularly.



Horses who work sometimes become injured and need time to rest so that they can heal. Laying up your horse doesn't have to be hard on you and the horse if you take the time to provide some mental stimulation for your recovering equine. Stall toys, companionship, and even light exercise can do wonders to keep your horse happy while she's healing.

See Chapter 5 for full details on exercising your horse for good health.

Feeding Your Hungry Horse

Probably the single-most important way to keep your horse healthy is to feed him right. Horses definitely are what they eat, and the expression "garbage in, garbage out" most certainly applies to horses.



Although it's often overlooked, water is the single most important part of your horse's daily diet. Without water, your horse would die in a very short time. Providing plenty of clean, fresh, palatable water is essential to keeping your horse healthy.

Horses also need plenty of forage to keep their digestive systems working efficiently. Most often in the form of hay or pasture, forage provides different types of nutrients and protein and carbohydrate levels, depending on the type.



Fats are also important in the horse's diet, and should be provided on a daily basis. The easiest way to provide fat to horses is to give them oil on their feed each day. Corn oil is the best choice because it's the least expensive and easy to find (your grocery store!).

Horses must have vitamins and minerals to stay healthy, of course, but that doesn't mean that you need to give them a vitamin and mineral tablet every day. The right feed should provide your horse with all the vitamins and minerals he needs if it's fresh and of the right type.

Chapter 6 provides full details on all these building blocks of equine nutrition. Chapter 7 covers feeding fundamentals; we describe different types of hay and pasture, talk about other types of feeds that you may want to consider, and walk you through the steps of feeding your horse properly.

Do you have an equine friend with special diet needs? Chapter 8 is the chapter for you! We discuss using dietary supplements and helping horses with weight and allergy problems. And if you're a do-it-yourself kind of person, Chapter 9 provides an introduction to growing food for your horse.

Tackling Disease



If the worst happens and your horse comes down with something, the best way to handle it is to stay calm and educate yourself. Call your vet out as soon as you sense that something is wrong, and learn as much as you can about your horse's diagnosis. Knowledge is power when it comes to veterinary issues, and you'll feel better with a thorough understanding of whatever is ailing your horse.

In the following sections, we discuss common equine ailments and infectious diseases, give you the basics of first aid, and introduce you to complementary therapies available for horses.

Common ailments

Issues that most often plague horses can be grouped in the following categories:

- ✓ **Soundness issues.** These problems affect the joints, tendons, ligaments, and/or muscles of the horse's legs.
- ✓ **Digestive woes.** Manifesting themselves as colic or diarrhea, these problems relate to either the upper or lower digestive tracts.
- ✓ **Skin disorders.** Anything from allergies to bacterial and fungal infections falls into this category.
- ✓ **Eye problems.** Horses are prone to some of the same eye problems as humans, plus a few of their own.
- ✓ **Respiratory issues.** Breathing problems aren't common in horses, but when they occur, they can be very troublesome.
- ✓ **Systemic problems.** Metabolic and immune system disorders make up this category.

Chapter 11 gives a detailed rundown of common conditions in each of these categories, and provides information on how each is treated.

Infectious diseases

A whole slew of infectious diseases regularly sweep through equine populations, and every horse owner needs to know how to recognize the symptoms of these ailments.

Some of these ailments are similar to infectious diseases that affect humans as well. These include equine influenza (the horse version of the flu), equine herpes virus (similar to the herpes virus that affects people), rabies, and tetanus.

Other infectious diseases that are unique to horses include strangles, a bacterium that affects the lymph nodes; equine protozoal myeloencephalitis (EPM), a protozoan parasite that attacks the nervous system; and equine infectious anemia, a virus that causes an anemic reaction.

Chapter 12 details all these diseases, as well as a few others that affect horses. The good news is that many of these diseases have vaccines (we talk about vaccinating your horse in detail in Chapter 4).

First aid

For some reason, horses seem prone to injury, which is why it's important for all horse owners to know basic first aid. Keeping a first-aid kit around is a must if you want to be ready to handle whatever injury your horse may incur.



Your first-aid kits should include the following items:

- ✓ Antibiotic ointment
- ✓ Antiseptic cleanser
- ✓ Bandages
- ✓ Cotton sheets or quilted wraps
- ✓ Duct tape
- ✓ Flexible bandages
- ✓ Gauze pads
- ✓ Hand sanitizer
- ✓ Latex gloves
- ✓ Lubricant
- ✓ Pocket knife
- ✓ Rectal thermometer

- ✓ Rubbing alcohol
- ✓ Scissors
- ✓ Tweezers
- ✓ Wound medication

Chapter 13 provides information on how and when to use each of these items. It also covers details on how to know when to call the vet, and when to handle an emergency yourself.

Alternative therapies

More and more horse owners today are becoming interested in alternative and complementary therapies. These types of therapies, which include acupuncture, Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine, and chiropractic, have been demonstrated to help horses in ways unprecedented in conventional veterinary medicine.

Veterinarians and other specialists working in these modalities are now practicing throughout the United States, making these types of therapies more accessible to the average horse owner. Chapter 14 covers a number of alternative and complementary therapies used on horses, detailing how they work and for what types of conditions.

Caring for Mare and Foal

If you have a mare you plan to breed so that you can have your own foal, you're embarking on a very special adventure in horse ownership. Breeding and birthing a foal, which we cover in Chapter 15, is an exciting experience that you'll never forget.

Before you breed, though, you need to research this aspect of horse husbandry carefully. Pregnant mares need special attention in order to deliver a healthy baby, and you as the mare owner must provide this care.



The birth of a foal is a crucial moment for both mother and baby, and it must be handled expertly if both horses are to survive. Your veterinarian will educate you about what to expect the day your mare delivers her foal, and coach you about when you need to call him or her to help.

After your baby hits the ground, your job as caretaker doesn't stop. Young foals need special monitoring during their first 24 hours to have a chance at survival. Training of the foal begins right away, and you're the one who needs to start teaching your youngster from the get-go. Chapter 16 provides information on how to start teaching your baby how to grow up to be a good horse.

Easing into the Senior Years

Aged horses are those who are more than 15 years old. Although these are considered your horse's golden years, they're likely to be the best ones of his life. Older horses are wise in the ways of the world, and they rarely waste their time worrying about the kinds of stuff that upsets younger horses — like plastic shopping bags blowing down the trail. Boo!

Senior horses also tend to be more patient and forgiving than their younger counterparts, so they make the best teachers for children and new adult riders.

The trade-off for all that your senior horse gives you is that you need to take special care of his needs as he gets older. Older horses are more prone to lameness, vision problems, and tooth problems. They sometimes need special consideration when it comes to feeding and exercise.

Senior horses do best when they have a job to do, and although many horse owners think that their older horses would rather be retired, these horses often become depressed and feel neglected when their work stops. Chapter 17 tells you how to keep your senior horse active for as long as possible, and how to ease him into retirement when he can no longer work.

In Chapter 18, we take a look at the end of your horse's life. Euthanasia is a humane option for horses who are incurably ill or suffering, and it's often the best gift an owner can give his or her horse. Loss of a horse is often followed by intense grief. In this chapter, we let you know that you aren't alone, and we help you find ways to remember and celebrate your horse's life.

