When beginning your physical examination of the colicky horse, one must first observe the attitude of the horse. Is the animal alert or depressed? How severe is the pain? Is it intermittent or continuous? What is the body condition of the horse? Is it thin, fat, or normal?

After these parameters are evaluated, then a temperature, pulse and respiratory rate should be taken. The presence of a fever may indicate an infectious process. Heart rates generally increase with pain and shock. Heart rates over 70 have a more guarded prognosis. Increased respiratory rates may be due to pain or compression of the thorax secondary to abdominal distension.

The horse’s gums should be evaluated for color and capillary refill time. The normal color of a horse’s gums is pink. Capillary refill time is the time it takes the gums to return to a pink color after you have blanched it out with finger pressure. This is approximately two seconds in the normal horse. In the horse that is going into shock, the mucous membrane color can range from dark pink to purple, with a capillary refill time of more than three seconds.

Auscultation of the abdomen with a stethoscope is important to determine the presence of intestinal sounds. We divide the abdomen into four quadrants, upper and lower left, and upper and lower right. In the normal animal there should be sounds in all of these areas. Percussion of the abdomen, especially the upper right side, may reveal a gas cap.