

# A Guide to Gut Sounds in Horses

by [Casie](#) · Published December 31, 2013 · Updated February 23, 2015

As an equine acupressure practitioner, something I commonly use is what is known in Traditional Chinese Medicine as the ‘Four Examinations’. The Four Examinations use the five senses and are a way of gathering information about a horse before using acupressure. They include looking, smelling/ listening (these two senses are grouped together in TCM), asking (asking the owner/ guardian questions), and touching.

For the listening examination, one of the most common things I will listen for is gut sounds (borborygmus)—the rumbling and gurgling noises which occur as food moves through the digestive system of the horse. Any abnormalities in or an absence of gut sounds is usually a pretty good cause for concern.

But you don’t have to be a vet or an acupressure practitioner to learn how to listen to gut sounds in horses. It’s a useful tool for assessing intestinal movement and digestive function and is something that I believe every horse owner should know how to do.

It can even be used to help a rider determine physical stress of the horse during heavy exercise (such as an endurance ride). So I’ve decided to write a basic ‘guide for gut sounds in horses’, if you will. This should provide some helpful information that any horse owner can use.

## How to Listen to Gut Sounds

You can either use a stethoscope or just place your ear next to the horse’s side to listen to gut sounds. Obviously, a stethoscope will enable you to hear more clearly, but I often just use my ear. (Use care when placing your ear next to your horse’s side though as he may kick if he’s in discomfort.)

There are generally four locations in which to listen to gut sounds. They are located in the upper and lower flank area on each side of the horse. This is the ‘hind gut’, where digestion of food primarily takes place.



Here's what you'll be listening to specifically in each of the quadrants:

- Upper left quadrant: small intestine
- Lower left quadrant: large intestine
- Upper right quadrant: large intestine and cecum (the cecum is a common site for impaction colic.)
- Lower right quadrant: large intestine

The small intestine tends to be fairly quiet while the large intestine and cecum tend to be a source of more sounds.

### **Types of Gut Sounds**

There are a variety of types of sounds you might hear when listening to the gut. Normal gut sounds will likely sound like a mixture of grumbles, roars, and even tinkling sounds. There is no specific rhythm, but you should hear a sound every few seconds or so.

When dehydration occurs (either from intense exercise or not drinking enough), there will be a decrease in the frequency and intensity of gut sounds.

Silence could indicate several things—gas, impending diarrhea, or impaction. Again, if you listen to all four quadrants and don't hear anything, a call to your vet is advised!

Faint tinkling sounds could indicate ulcers or possibly an infection, but this is something that a vet would need to diagnose. A constant rumbling likely indicates diarrhea.

Obviously, if the horse is showing other signs of distress such as not eating, lethargy, rolling, pawing, etc, I wouldn't even worry about checking gut sounds—I would call the vet immediately.

But learning how to listen for gut sounds is a good thing for any horse owner to know how to do—along with learning how to check the other vital signs. Practice listening to gut sounds on several horses to get the hang of it. Also, it's a good idea to learn what 'normal' gut sounds sound like on your horse so you will know if they do become abnormal.