Electrocardiography in horses – part 1: how to make a good recording

Elektrocardiografie bij paarden – deel 1: een goede opname maken

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ABSTRACT

Upon auscultation, cardiac dysrhythmias can be suspected, but electrocardiography is the ultimate diagnostic tool. Electrocardiogram (ECG) recording used to be reserved to specialized centers, but nowadays relatively cheap and small recorders are available to the practitioner in the field. ECGs can therefore be recorded ambulatory and during prolonged periods at rest or even during exercise. The know-how of a good quality recording is mandatory for a correct diagnosis. The basic equipment consists of electrodes, a recorder and a way to display the trace. Self-adhesive electrodes should be used, and positioned along the mean electrical axis of the heart. Small recording devices offer the advantage of allowing recordings during exercise.

As the electrical impulse spreads through the heart, the ECG trace shows successively a P wave, a QRS complex and a T wave. Tα waves are not always clearly visible in horses.

The positioning of the electrodes may differ for ambulatory, exercise or long-term resting recordings. However, as long as the electrodes are positioned along the mean electrical axis, their exact position is not of crucial importance.

INTRODUCTION

A cardiac exam always starts with a detailed history and a thorough clinical exam. An imperative aspect of the clinical examination is a skillfully performed auscultation which allows the gathering of important information about the cardiac cycle and blood flow (Patteson, 1996). Further diagnostic tests, such as biochemistry, echocardiography and electrocardiography, can be carried out to obtain additional information about the exact cause and importance of cardiac disease.

Echocardiography allows the imaging of cardiac structures, the determination of chamber size and provides information about the cardiac function (Patteson, 1996).

Electrocardiography is the ultimate tool for the diagnosis and classification of dysrhythmias. An electrocardiogram (ECG) can be recorded for brief (ambulatory) or prolonged (e.g. 24-hour or “Holter” recording) periods, at rest and during exercise. ECG recording during exercise used to be reserved to specialized centers because of the expensive equipment. Over the last years, relatively cheap, battery-powered recorders have become available to the equine practitioner for ECG recording under field conditions. In order to correctly diagnose a dysrhythmia, a good quality recording and a thorough knowledge of ECG interpretation are mandatory.

This paper consists of two parts. The first part explains how to make a good quality ECG recording in resting and exercising horses. The second part describes how to interpret the ECG and reach a final diagnosis.
Principles of electrophysiology

When a cardiac cell depolarizes or repolarizes, different currents flow across the cell membrane at various time points resulting in a potential difference and an external electrical field. When enough cells de- or repolarize at the same time, the electrical field will be strong enough to be recorded from the body surface. The ECG register changes in the electrical field around the heart via electrodes, usually placed on the skin. The sum of potential differences of all individual cells can be represented by a mean electrical axis (MEA), which indicates the average direction of electrical activity in the heart. The recorded potential difference is largest when the electrodes are placed parallel to the MEA.

The combination of two electrodes, one negative and one positive, between which a potential difference is measured, is called a “lead”. If the direction of the overall depolarizing electrical activity is headed towards the positive electrode, the deflection on the ECG will be upward (positive). If the electrical activity points away from the positive electrode, the deflection will be downward (negative) (Patteson, 1996).

Normal equine ECG

The normal conduction process follows a rather fixed pathway through the heart: from the sinus node through the atrial myocardium, the AV node, the Hiss and Purkinje system to the ventricles. As the rhythm originates from the sinus node, it is called ‘sinus rhythm’.

Deflections on the ECG originate from the depolarization or repolarization of a relatively large muscle mass, such as the atrial and ventricular myocardium. The depolarization of a small group of cells, such as sinus node and atrioventricular (AV) node, fail to produce sufficient changes in the electrical field. For this reason, the impulse generation in the sinus node is not visible on the ECG (Patteson, 1996).

When the impulse spreads through the atria, the ECG shows a P wave (Figure 1). The morphology of P waves is variable: it can be bifid, simple positive or biphasic. When the heart rate changes, the P wave morphology often changes as well, and even successive P waves are not always identical in the normal horse. At a slow heart rate, the P wave is often bifid. The first peak represents the depolarization of the right atrium and the second one that of the left atrium. In its biphasic morphology, the P wave is usually of the negative/positive type. A normal P wave should take less than 0.16 seconds (Bonagura and Reef, 2004) (Table 1). The T\textsubscript{a} wave, which is the atrial repolarization, is not always clearly identifiable (Figure 1).

Atria and ventricles are isolated from each other by fibrous tissue, except at the level of the AV node. The conduction of the impulse through the AV node is very slow, and profoundly affected by a vagal tone (Patteson, 1996). As the conduction itself does not result in a deflection on the ECG, it presents as the flat PR segment. In horses, the normal PR interval may last up to 0.5 seconds, because of their high vagal tone (Bonagura and Reef, 2004) (Table 1).

Once through the AV node, the impulse spreads very rapidly through the Hiss bundle and Purkinje system to depolarize the ventricular myocardium. The latter produces a large deflection on the ECG, the QRS complex (Figure 1). The QRS complex is composed of various components, defined according to international agreements. By convention, the first positive (upward) deflection is an R wave. The first negative (downward) deflection that precedes an R wave is called a Q wave. The first negative deflection that follows an R wave is the S wave. Subsequent positive deflections are R’ waves and subsequent negative deflections S’ waves (Tilley, 1992). This means that although the complex is named ‘QRS’, it has not always – and usually not – a ‘QRS’ morphology in horses. The R or rS or rSr’ morphology is most common in horses. The duration of the QRS complex should not exceed 0.14 seconds (Bonagura and Reef, 2004) (Table 1).

Each depolarization is followed by a repolarization, represented by the T wave (Figure 1). In horses, the T wave is very variable in size and orientation and particularly dependent on the heart rate. Even beat-to-beat changes in the RR interval often affect the morphology of the T wave. T waves are not helpful in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave or complex</th>
<th>Duration (seconds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P wave</td>
<td>≤0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR interval</td>
<td>≤0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pony: ≤0.24)</td>
<td>(foal: 0.11 – 0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QRS complex</td>
<td>≤0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(foal: 0.05 – 0.08)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QT interval</td>
<td>≤0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(foal: 0.19 – 0.36)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Duration of different waves and complexes on a normal ECG (Rossdale, 1967; Lombard et al., 1984; Fregin, 1992; Vaala, 1993; Patteson, 1996; Bonagura and Reef, 2004).
dysrhythmias that are continuously present. For occa-
sionally occurring dysrhythmias, 24-hour monitoring is necessary (Magdesian, 2004). This type of moni-
toring allows the frequency of dysrhythmias to be cata-
logued. Also when a horse is examined for seizures or collapse, continuous ECG monitoring may be ne-
cessary to confirm or rule out a cardiac cause. Many
dysrhythmias only occur during exercise while others,
although present at rest, may disappear during exercise.
Therefore, exercise ECGs are a mainstay in the diag-
nosis of dysrhythmias and the work-up of a poor per-
forming horse (Morris and Seeherman, 1991; Scheffer
and Sloet van Oldruitenborgh-Oosterbaan, 1996).

To start recording an ECG, electrodes need to be at-
tached to the horse’s body and connected to the record-
ing device. Different devices may have 3, 4, or up to
10 electrodes (Figure 2).

There is no universally accepted lead system for
the use in large animals (Reef and McGuiirk, 2002).
Usually, a single-lead recording is sufficient (Holmes,
1984). However, the advantage of a multiple lead sys-

tem is that each lead detects the potential difference be-
etween its 2 electrodes from a unique angle, which
might help to differentiate between a normal or ab-
onormal complex (Figure 3) (Reimer et al., 1992). In ad-
inon, when one electrode falls off in a multiple-lead
system, the recording can still continue from the re-
aining electrodes. Whichever method is used, the
procedure should be standardized so that ECGs can be
compared (Holmes, 1984).

Systems with 4 electrodes are most commonly used.
In such a system, the black electrode serves as a refe-
rence electrode for the electrocardiograph and can be
positioned anywhere on the body surface of the horse.
The remaining 3 electrodes are used to construct 3
leads: lead I between the red (right arm, -) and the yel-
low (left arm, +) electrode, lead II between the red (-)
and the green (left foot, +) electrode, and lead III be-
tween the yellow (-) and the green (+) electrode (Fre-
gin, 1985). Modern devices will automatically record
from all 3 leads at the same time, offering the advan-
tages of a multiple-lead recording. Older devices might
require a manual switch between each lead.

Recording of an ECG

An ambulatory ECG has high diagnostic value for
dysrhythmias that are continuously present. For occa-

Figure 2. Recording device (Televet 100®) with 4 elec-

trode cables (green, yellow, red and black) and a self-ad-
hesive electrode.
The positioning of the electrodes is not strictly defined in horses and can be adapted according to the circumstances. As a general rule of thumb, electrodes need to be positioned along the MEA, which is directed from the apex of the heart towards the base and slightly to cranial and to the right. This means that one electrode should be on the lower thorax near the cardiac apex: between the elbow and xiphoid area. The second electrode should be positioned towards the cardiac base which is more dorsal, in the region between the lower neck and the withers. Below, some examples for electrode placement are given.

**Ambulatory ECG recording**

For ambulatory recordings at rest, the base-apex lead system gives the best results. It corresponds best to the MEA direction and hence results in the largest deflections for both atrial and ventricular waveforms (Young, 2004). The negative (red) electrode is positioned in the lower third of the right jugular groove or on the scapula, corresponding to the base area of the heart. The positive (green) electrode is positioned over the apex beat area of the heart, on the thorax, caudal to the left elbow. The yellow electrode can be positioned on the middle of the left scapula. The remaining black electrode can be positioned anywhere on the body surface of the horse. Lead II is recorded.

**Exercise ECG recording**

The base-apex system is unsuited for recordings during exercise (Young, 2004), since electrodes are then more prone to creating movement artefacts and falling off, and can interfere with the freedom of movement of horse and rider. For ridden exercise recordings, an adaptation of the base-apex system should be used.

The negative (red) electrode is placed on the left shoulder blade, near the withers. When saddled, this position is just in front of the left saddle flap. The positive (green) electrode is placed just behind the saddle girth on the left, on a position where the leg of the rider doesn’t interfere with it. The remaining yellow electrode can be placed just above or underneath the green one, creating an extra lead. A good position for the reference electrode is just underneath the red one. In this construction, the rider can easily reattach any electrode, and the electrodes are unlikely to be affected by the saddle or girth slipping backwards during fast exercise (Young, 2004). The negative (red) and reference (black) electrodes can also be placed underneath the left saddle flap, which offers extra protection against dislodging.

To prevent electrodes from dislodging, e.g. during intensive exercise or during lunging exercise, one can use an elastic girth around the horse’s thorax and place the electrodes underneath the girth. In this vertical modification of the base-apex system, the cranio-caudal orientation of the MEA is lost. Therefore, the P wave will be lower in amplitude than that of a true base-apex configuration but large QRS deflections will still be present. The negative (red) electrode is positioned on the right side of the withers, and the positive (green) electrode behind the left elbow joint, on the apex beat area. The remaining (yellow) electrode is placed about 10 cm above the green one. The reference electrode can be positioned anywhere under the girth (Figure 4). The girth can be used during lunging exercise but also during ridden exercise or in trotters, where it is placed just cranial and partially underneath the saddle or harness.

**Long-term ECG recording**

For long-term recordings, e.g. 24 hours or more, the recording device, electrodes and wires need to be protected. The girth, with the electrode configuration mentioned above, is suited as it covers all electrodes and wires so that the horse can not damage them. The recorder itself is placed in a protective box so that it does not get damaged during rolling.

As stated before, no universally accepted lead system exists for recordings in large animals. Adaptations to the systems described above can be made according to personal experience and preferences.

**CONCLUSION**

Electrocardiography is the ultimate diagnostic tool when cardiac dysrhythmias are suspected. Nowadays, relatively cheap equipment (€ 1000-3000) has become available to the equine practitioner. An ECG can be recorded ambulatory, for a brief period, or for a longer period when monitoring for less frequent dysrhythmias. An exercise ECG is mandatory to assess the importance of certain dysrhythmias found at rest and especially in horses with poor performance.
For the recording of an ECG, self-adhesive electrodes are most appropriate. Modern recording devices offer the possibility of a wireless transmission and the storing of the recorded signal, allowing online monitoring during exercise and making 24-hour recordings. When the signal can be displayed on a computer, software may aid in analyzing the recorded trace. However, visual inspection of the equine ECG usually remains necessary because the large equine T wave may interfere with the automatic analysis.

The exact position of the electrodes is not that important, as long as the leads are constructed along the MEA. Multiple lead systems have the advantage of being more sensitive and always have one or more “backup” leads in case of electrode dislodgement.

The interpretation of the recorded ECG can be challenging and requires experience. A guideline to the interpretation of an ECG and identification of the different kinds of dysrhythmias are discussed in part 2.

REFERENCES


Rossdale P.D. (1967). Clinical studies on the newborn thoroughbred foal. II. Heart rate, auscultation and electro-