

THE VET REPORT

A picture of good health

As the saying goes, prevention is better than cure. Here, equine vet **Imogen Burrows** offers advice on how you can keep common health problems at bay so your horse or pony stays healthy



OUR EXPERT
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- this is akin to shutting the door after the horse has bolted. There are many avenues to explore which will help you to safeguard your horse or pony's wellbeing and keep him fit and well. Unfortunately, a lot of people take short cuts, usually to avoid spending money. This can be a false economy as the likely result is they will end up with a poorly horse or pony and some unexpected, and possibly significant, veterinary bills.

Preventative medicine is certainly one of the best investments you can make for your horse. It will maximise the chance that you and your equine companion can enjoy your chosen activities for as long as you wish!

Hurdles to overcome

The problem with preventative medicine is that it's just not cool. It's tough for vets to make biosecurity sound exciting.



Biosecurity measures are key to preventing the spread of disease

Most owners believe they have a pretty good handle on what to feed their horse or how to care for him.

Yet while we all know that vaccinating against flu and tetanus is a good idea, many equines in the UK remained unprotected.

Another difficulty we face is that preventive medicine covers a huge range of topics. There are so many actions owners could take that I believe they get overwhelmed and simply don't know where to start.

Critical understanding

Biosecurity may not be top of the list in yard chit-chat, but in a strangles outbreak, everyone wants to know where the disease has come from.

Like it or not, understanding biosecurity is absolutely critical to managing a happy yard of healthy horses, be that one horse at home, or a competition yard with 50 or more on site.

Biosecurity refers to all measures that may be taken to either prevent the introduction or reduce the spread of infectious disease within an equine population.

One of the most commonly recognised parts of a yard biosecurity strategy is a

Your horse's health and welfare should be your top priority



Preventative healthcare should be at the forefront of every horse owner's mind. As an equine vet, I would rather be visiting healthy horses than fighting disease or illness that could potentially have been avoided.

In simple terms, preventative healthcare means taking measures to prevent disease, as opposed to treating problems after they happen.

All too often, preventative measures are put in place only after disease has occurred



Avoid your horse having physical contact with an unknown equine

Preventative Medicine Strategies	
STRATEGY	AIMS
Vaccination	Reduce the frequency of disease within both the national horse population and individual horses
Worming programmes	Reduce worm-related diseases and minimise drug resistance
Nutrition	Provide balanced nutrition appropriate for the horse or pony's requirements, which sustains them to maintain a healthy body condition (fat) score
Weight	Weight management to achieve a healthy body condition (fat) score
Pasture management	Provide adequate, safe grazing to enrich quality of life, manage weight and individual health considerations (for example, laminitis), and form an integral part of parasite control
Dentistry	Identify dental disease or abnormalities early, reducing unnecessary pain
Orthopaedic checks (soundness, back assessments, saddle fitting)	Maximise ridden comfort and athletic performance as well as avoiding unnecessary pain
Biosecurity	Minimise risks of contracting/spreading infectious disease

vaccination strategy. However, isolation protocols, herd, stable and pasture management and a good understanding of the signs of common infectious diseases are all paramount to building a robust biosecurity plan.

The importance of vaccination

There are some who feel we over-vaccinate, but this is not true. The reality is we are extremely unlikely to see over-vaccination within the equine population. Research has shown us that to protect our horses against

infectious disease, we need to achieve a vaccinate rate of 70 per cent of the national equine population. Unfortunately, only around 48 per cent is actually vaccinated against equine influenza, which explains why flu still occurs and is not infrequently diagnosed throughout the UK.

Flu vaccinations provide two different benefits. Firstly, horses may be protected from developing the disease or the severity will be greatly reduced. Secondly, it reduces the amount of virus a vaccinated horse will spread (viral shedding), should he become infected.

This second level of protection is vital to protect a whole herd. Unfortunately, protection against viral shedding is only achieved within the first few (up to six) months after booster vaccinations are given.

This is why horses exposed to higher levels of competition stress, and those mingling regularly with unknown horses, are advised to vaccinate at six month intervals by some official bodies, such as the FEI.

Most horses have adequate immunity to fight off disease if they are vaccinated annually, ►

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but additional boosters may be recommended in a disease outbreak or stressful situations.

Even more surprisingly, only 56 per cent of equines are vaccinated against tetanus. This usually fatal disease has an excellent, relatively cheap vaccination which requires infrequent boosters (every two to three years). Yet, many owners elect not to protect their much loved horse or pony.

Targeted worming

Worm control is a topic that causes much confusion. Massive amounts of information is available, from various sources, but this only seems to add to the bewilderment.

The best deworming programmes rely on good pasture management, a sound understanding of the type of parasites that affect horses and, most critically, knowing what worms need to be treated, with which drug and when treatment should be given. No programme will be truly effective until we identify which horses require treatment.

Historically, deworming was performed on an interval basis, using anthelmintic drugs at set intervals throughout the year, rotating drug types each year. While this strategy may still be advised in some situations, there has been a move towards targeted strategic worming.

This involves worming for specific parasites at certain times of year, along with diagnostic testing, for example faecal egg counts and taepeworm testing to guide whether worming is needed during the rest of the year.

This approach has several benefits. Deworming at specific times of the year will maximise the impact we have on specific worm burdens. Meanwhile, identifying the animals carrying significant burdens and focusing treatment on them only, minimises drug resistance and reduces costs to owners.



Egg counts help identify the horses that need worming



Your vet is there to help prevent health problems as well as treat them

Know when to call the vet

Vets are an invaluable knowledge resource, but one which is often poorly utilised. Research by the Keeping Britain's Horses Healthy (KBHH) initiative came up with a number of reasons why owners do not approach vets for information more often.

Owner's concerns included being viewed as time-wasting, being pressured into a visit, being charged for information or vets not being available at convenient times.

Building a good relationship with your vet practice is fundamental to providing the best preventative care for your horse.

As a vet it is very rewarding to be part of that relationship, knowing we are trusted with a horse or pony's wellbeing.

Being viewed as approachable, providing advice to keep animals under our care healthy and happy, and treatment where only necessary in times of need, is at the core good veterinary work.

Preventing illness or injury before it happens is the ultimate aim for every horse owner. Working closely with your vet and other qualified and experienced paraprofessionals will ensure that your horse remains in the picture of health.

Who can treat your horse?

When it comes to care of the horse as an athlete, owners are particularly passionate. They have horses checked under the guise of multiple disciplines – equine dentists, physios, osteopaths, chiropractors, acupuncturists, saddle fitters, podiatrists and vets.

The question is, who should be involved with checking your horse's health, or providing assistance if he is injured or unwell? It would be easy to say 'call the vet' as the default position, however, veterinary intervention isn't always necessary.

Take the healthy horse that is performing well. You have decided to buy him a new saddle. The most appropriate person is someone to fit the saddle. It is, however, important to get the right person for the job.

Checking the person is suitably qualified and experienced is critical for your horse's wellbeing – in this case I recommend a registered qualified master saddle fitter for the job (visit www.mastersaddlers.co.uk).

If someone is registered with a recognised organisation, it provides reassurance they are qualified and their knowledge is kept current – ensuring your horse receives the best care.

A similar scenario presents itself with dentistry. Historically, rasping a horse's teeth was a role performed by a farrier!

Of course, nowadays that thought would be outrageous, and we are lucky to be able to call on the services of a multitude of equine vets who are qualified to perform dental work, along with the paraprofession of equine dental technicians.

Unfortunately, there is still a lot of confusion among horse owners, with many people referring to themselves as 'dentists' without appropriate qualification or experience. Such people are able to legally carry out basic dental care and manual rasping.

More detailed procedures such as examining, evaluating and recording abnormalities, or using motorised dental equipment, must only be performed by a DEFRA approved equine dental technician or veterinary surgeon.

The British Association of Equine Dental Technicians has a full list of their fully qualified members available online (visit: www.baedt.com). ■

● To help you keep your horse or pony healthy, XLequine practices are holding 'Picture of Health' activities during the summer. These will educate people about preventative healthcare and help reduce the risk of unexpected or significant vet bills. To find out more, visit: www.xlequine.co.uk