

HORSE CARE



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Under the microscope

When an infection strikes your horse, it pays to know what you're up against. Read on to discover more about common infections, treatment options and how to protect your horse

Words Katy Islip

A healthy horse is a happy horse, and it's usually easy to tell when he's a bit off-colour. However, it's far harder to determine whether he's just feeling a bit glum or falling ill. There are plenty of bugs and germs out there that love to get under your horse's skin, with effects from irritating to deadly.

We've recruited vet Colin Mitchell to give us the low-down on a range of both common and some more unusual infections which can affect our horses. He also looks at treatment options and the best methods of protection, because, when it comes to your horse's health, forewarned is definitely forearmed.



OUR EXPERT

COLIN MITCHELL studied at Edinburgh Vet School and works in north-east England. He's a partner at Scott Mitchell Associates, which is part of XLVets, an independent veterinary practice group. Colin's an attending vet at Hexham and Newcastle racecourses and in 2004 attained the RCVS certificate in equine practice. To find out more visit www.scottmitchellassociates.co.uk

So what's an infection?

Put simply, an infection occurs when the body is unable to protect itself from micro-organisms, such as bacteria, viruses or fungi. In humans, an example of this would be the 'flu, versus a non-infectious disease such as asthma.

An infectious disease doesn't have to be contagious (ie it won't necessarily pass from horse to horse), but if it is, there are different ways it can spread, and knowing how an infection spreads is the key to managing and containing an outbreak. One way is through direct contact, for example by horses touching or sniffing each other, or through an intermediate host such as a biting insect. Other conditions are spread by aerosol, when particles travel through the air - a single cough can transmit an infection to many other animals - or through shared items, from water troughs which



Infections spread easily among groups

serve neighbouring fields, to tack or grooming brushes.

When an infection is suspected, the first thing to do is have the diagnosis confirmed through laboratory tests, then work with your vet to keep your horse comfortable as he fights it off. Although recovery can be slow, most common infections can be dealt with by good nursing, careful hygiene and isolation, so the diagnosis of an infection isn't the end of the world and may not even need treatment with drugs.

Rod-shaped bacteria like these cause infections including tetanus

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Equine STIs can have devastating effects on pregnant mares

Sexually-transmitted infections

Just like humans, horses are susceptible to STIs and the following can be found in breeding horses

EQUINE VIRAL ARTERITIS (EVA)

OUTLINE FACTS

INFECTION TYPE: Viral
INCUBATION: N/A
VACCINATION: Yes

This virus causes abortion in pregnant mares and is transmitted through sexual contact, artificial insemination (AI) and by aerosol. It can also cause inflammation of the inside of the horse's nose and airways, leading to breathing problems, plus signs of conjunctivitis (inflammation of the structures around the eyeball) and swelling around the eyes.

Around 60% of studs ask that mares are tested for EVA, and it can be vaccinated against.

EVA usually clears up by itself, but it can remain in stallions for years



without any signs of infection. Roughly one in three infected stallions becomes a carrier like this, so a horse shouldn't be used for breeding unless they've tested clear for EVA. In the UK it's a notifiable disease which must be reported to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

CONTAGIOUS EQUINE METRITIS (CEM)

OUTLINE FACTS

INFECTION TYPE: Bacterial
INCUBATION: N/A
VACCINATION: No

Harboured in the reproductive tract of both sexes, CEM is spread by direct contact and can cause abortion and infertility, but will only cause signs if a mare is used for breeding. Carried in sperm and semen, CEM can also be passed on through AI, and almost all studs will ask that horses are swabbed for it. If CEM is diagnosed, treatment is usually by antibiotics. It's another notifiable disease which must be reported to DEFRA.

Rarer types of infections

Alongside these more common illnesses, equines can also sometimes contract rare or exotic infections - here's the low-down on a selection of notifiable nasties which can affect horses, donkeys and mules

EQUINE INFECTIOUS ANAEMIA (EIA OR SWAMP FEVER)

OUTLINE FACTS

INFECTION TYPE: Viral
INCUBATION: 2-4 weeks
VACCINATION: No

This rare viral infection is spread by biting insects and causes anaemia, a lack of red blood cells in the blood which carry oxygen around the body. Symptoms include a recurrent upward fluctuation in body temperature, and the severity of signs can often

vary - some horses show none at all. Once infected, an animal is a carrier for life, and in England, horses diagnosed with EIA are destroyed to prevent its spread.

WEST NILE VIRUS

OUTLINE FACTS

INFECTION TYPE: Viral
INCUBATION: Thought to be 3-15 days
VACCINATION: Yes

This is a viral infection of birds, horses and humans and is spread by mosquito bites. It causes high



Biting insects spread many diseases, including EIA

temperatures and swelling of the brain (encephalitis), which will cause neurological signs such as a horse being unsteady on his feet.

If a horse is infected, there's unfortunately not much that can be done. A vaccine does exist but to date there have been no cases diagnosed in the UK in either horses or people.



FIND OUT MORE
Visit www.defra.gov.uk/animal-diseases/notifiable/ for more information on notifiable diseases

AFRICAN HORSE SICKNESS (AHS)

OUTLINE FACTS

INFECTION TYPE: Viral
INCUBATION: 3-5 days
VACCINATION: Yes but none yet licensed in the UK

Although no cases have as yet been reported in the UK, AHS is present in sub-Saharan Africa and has spread as far north as Morocco and the Middle East. This highly infectious and often fatal virus is carried by biting insects. Symptoms include raised body temperatures, swelling of the eyelids, breathing difficulties, coughing and nasal discharge. Imported horses from at-risk countries are routinely tested for AHS.



PC DOUGLAS WELSH UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

The symptoms of AHS can be very distressing

Managing an infection

If you suspect your horse has an infection, the first step for your vet is to confirm diagnosis through testing. Next, if it's a contagious infection it's essential to halt movement on or off the yard and implement an isolation policy. Colin says: "Non-infected animals who don't show signs of disease are normally separated into those which have been in contact with affected horses but are not yet showing any clinical signs, and those who have had no contact with the affected horses. All these groups should be isolated from each other."

As an outbreak runs its course, you should be prepared to move horses between these groups. Lab tests can be very helpful to monitor the course of the disease and to prove a horse or yard is infection-free. Antibiotics are not always

required and often the horse will recover with good nursing care to keep him warm, comfortable and encouraged to eat and drink as normally as he can.

Colin adds: "It's worth making your horse's favourite foods available to tempt him to eat, and if he's got a respiratory infection simply keeping his nose as clear of mucus as possible can really help, as can providing easy-to-chew feeds."



Tempt your horse to eat with foods he likes



Keeping a horse warm and comfortable is key when he has an infection

Protect your horse from infection by:

- Vaccinating him appropriately
- Only taking him out competing when he's healthy
- Avoiding sharing transport as much as possible
- Avoiding mixing with horses from unknown yards
- Avoiding nose-to-nose contact with unknown horses
- If travelling abroad with your horse, making yourself aware of the legislation surrounding diseases before and after travel, and read up on which vaccinations are recommended