

## **Equine Influenza – What You Need to Know**

### **Why are vaccinated horses testing positive for equine flu?**

Vaccination gives your horse good protection against flu, but does not guarantee that they will never catch flu. If your horse does come into contact with the virus clinical symptoms will be much less severe, they will get better much quicker and will spread less of the virus. This means other horses are less likely to get sick.

### **I have read about vaccination and herd immunity – what does this mean?**

The more horses that are vaccinated the slower the spread of the virus. The principal of herd immunity was demonstrated by the reduction of the MMR vaccine that our children get when they are young. In 1998 there was a scare about the safety of the MMR vaccine that resulted in a huge drop in the number of children being vaccinated and a significant rise in the number of measles outbreaks.

At present only 40% of the horse population are vaccinated against flu. If we can get this to 75% herd immunity will reduce the risk of flu epidemics. So when someone decides not to vaccinate their horse they are not just putting their own horse at risk but the whole equine population.

### **What do I need to look out for?**

‘Flu’ causes upper respiratory tract disease. Symptoms usually appear within 1-5 days of exposure to the virus. They include:

- High Fever
- Harsh dry cough
- Nasal discharge
- Ocular discharge
- Loss of appetite
- Depression

These symptoms can be very similar to those seen with Strangles and with various cold viruses. It is important to differentiate these different respiratory diseases to ensure appropriate treatment. Vaccinated horses can still be infected but will only show mild symptoms so don't assume that because your horse has been vaccinated they can't have flu

### **If my horse is displaying these symptoms what should I do?**

If your horse is exhibiting any signs of respiratory disease it is important to isolate them immediately from other horses. Arrange for your vet to examine your horse and take samples for analysis. The Animal Health Trust has an Equine Influenza Surveillance Programme, which provides free testing of samples for Equine Influenza. A nasal swab is taken to test for the virus alongside a blood sample which tests for antibodies against the virus. The blood sample must be repeated after 2 weeks to see if there has been any rise in the antibody levels.

### **How is flu transmitted?**

Equine influenza is highly contagious; it is spread by inhalation of airborne droplets from infected horses. These droplets can travel a significant distance; they have been shown to travel several kilometres. Disease can also be spread by transmission of droplets on contaminated objects such as people's hands or clothing, brushes, tack, mucking out equipment and haynets.

### **What should I do if my horse needs to be isolated?**

Infected or suspicious cases should be kept isolated in a separate airspace from healthy horses, as far away as is practically possible, ideally at least 25 metres away. They should have their own separate grooming and mucking out equipment and a separate muck heap should be used. All personnel should wear protective clothing, use a foot dip with clean disinfectant (Virkon or Dettol are good disinfectants) that is regularly changed and wash their hands following contact with infected cases. The isolated horses should be looked after last after all of the healthy horses. Tape off the isolation area and use signage to make all other owners aware to avoid the area.

### **A Horse on my yard has been isolated with suspected flu – what should I do?**

Stop all movement on and off the yard until you have received the all clear. Monitor the temperatures of other in-contact horses daily and record any clinical signs. Any horse with a temperature over 38.5°C should be isolated and your vet called immediately. If your horse is not vaccinated speak to your vet about starting a new vaccination course.

### **What is the treatment for flu?**

Isolation of infected cases is of vital importance to reduce spread. 'Flu' is caused by a virus so will not respond to antibiotics, but some horses will get a secondary bacterial infection and in these cases antibiotics will be warranted. Infected cases can be made more comfortable by giving painkillers such as bute, this will help keep their temperature down and reduce the inflammation in their respiratory tract. Keeping them warm and dry and feeding soft food will also help infected cases to feel better.

The respiratory tract will be damaged by the virus and will need time to recover, it is important to give horses sufficient recovery time before resuming normal exercise. As a rule of thumb, horses should have 1 week off work for each day that they had a fever.

### **How can we prevent further outbreaks?**

All horses without exception should be vaccinated against 'flu'. Even those that do not go out to shows are still at risk of infection if they are within 5km of other horses or if there are other horses travelling on and off the yard. Although the vaccination is not 100% effective at preventing 'flu', it does significantly reduce the severity of the clinical signs, horses will recover quicker and be less infectious to others on the yard.

All new horses arriving on a new yard should be isolated for a minimum of 2 weeks on arrival and there should be a yard protocol that all horses are vaccinated. If a horse needs to start a new vaccination course they would ideally wait 7 days before coming onto the new yard.

When out at competitions or even when out hacking it is important to minimise contact between horses, do not allow your horse to sniff noses with other horses. If you are going out competing take all your own equipment including water buckets and avoid communal areas. Disinfect all your equipment including your trailer or lorry when returning to the yard.

## **My horse needs to start a vaccination course – what do they need to have?**

To start a new course they will need to have the following:

1<sup>st</sup> Vaccine Flu & Tetanus

2<sup>nd</sup> Vaccine Flu & Tetanus (21 – 92 days after the 1<sup>st</sup> vaccine has been given)

3<sup>rd</sup> Vaccine Flu only (150 – 215 days after the 2<sup>nd</sup> vaccine)

After the 3<sup>rd</sup> vaccine they will move to six monthly or annual boosters

## **Does my horse need a six month booster?**

The flu virus is constantly evolving and changing and the most recent outbreak is a particularly virulent strain. If your horse is going on and off the yard to lessons or competitions or others from the yard are doing the same, the current advice is to give a six month booster to increase their immunity to this particular strain. If your horse never leaves the yard, others are not coming and going and you are not close to a big livery yard or competition centre then you are classed as relatively low risk and can choose to wait for the 12 month booster. It is ultimately your decision and you must weigh up the risk but your vet will be happy to discuss this with you.

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