



Preventing Summertime Contagious Disease

Nathan Voris, DVM

"Summertime, and the livin' is easy".....unless, of course, you work with horses. For those of us lucky (or foolish) enough to make a living working with our four-legged friends, summer means sweating more, biting insects and many long weekends at the horse show. Unfortunately, the stress of the heat, travel and showing all take a toll on the horse's immune system and can bring on serious respiratory and/or neurologic illness in our equine athletes. Fear not, for there are some simple things every horse owner can do to help reduce the risk of illness caused by bacteria and viruses whether they lurk in the show stable or fly through the air.

The best way to fight disease is to prevent it from happening in the first place. The most common method of prevention is through vaccination. In our practice, we routinely immunize horses against Eastern and Western Encephalomyelitis (Sleeping Sickness) and Tetanus once yearly; West Nile Virus every 4 months during mosquito season; Strangles (Equine Distemper) once or twice yearly; and Influenza and Rhinopneumonitis at least twice yearly and up to every 60-90 days in horses with busy show schedules.

Sleeping Sickness and West Nile are mosquito borne viral diseases. Clinical signs may include fever, but more often involve depression, appetite loss and varying degrees of incoordination.

Strangles is caused by a highly contagious bacterium called *Streptococcus equi*. Horses with Strangles generally have a high fever, swollen lymph nodes in the throat latch area, and thick, yellow nasal discharge.

Influenza (Influenza virus) and Rhinopneumonitis (Herpes virus) are the two biggest threats to our busy equine athletes and can occur any time of year. Both viruses are transmitted via aerosolized respiratory secretions that can travel long distances after an infected horse coughs or snorts. Horses with Influenza or Rhinopneumonitis will usually have a cough, high fever, clear nasal discharge, depression and loss of appetite. Additionally, one form of Rhinopneumonitis can cause neurologic signs-weakness, loss of coordination or even the ability to stand up.

Other preventative measures for Sleeping Sickness and the West Nile Virus include mosquito abatement programs. These may include periodic chemical application, but an effective program always addresses eliminating sources of standing water. Good airflow through the barn will reduce flies and mosquitoes, and at the same time help to reduce viral and bacterial respiratory disease.

It is always a good idea to quarantine new horses for 2-3 weeks prior to introducing them into the general horse population. This will allow you to observe the new horse for signs of illness that may develop in the days following arrival. If you do have a horse that becomes sick, separating him from the herd may help reduce the number of horses that become ill. Remember, humans can carry disease on clothing and equipment, so always handle the sick horse last.

Finally, there are medications available that can enhance your horse's immune system prior to a stressful event (weaning, shipping, showing, etc.).

Illness, in whatever form, can cause significant loss of performance due to loss of appetite, loss of condition, time taken out of training to recover, or even loss of the animal. Vaccination is an effective way to help prevent serious illness. Because different regions of the country have different diseases of concern, consult your veterinarian concerning the immunization needs of your horse. If you have questions regarding the health and well-being of your horse, do not hesitate to call our clinic. A veterinarian will be glad to assist you with all of your equine medicine, lameness, surgery or reproductive needs.