

Lesson 5: Herd Health

It is essential that owners have health programs to take care of their horses. For breeders with many horses, it becomes even more important because the herd provides an income. When unsure about an injury's seriousness, contact a veterinarian.

Vaccinations and Vaccines

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" describes the importance of preventing problems before they happen. It takes a great deal of time and expensive care to help a sick animal regain its health, compared to the small cost of a vaccine. A vaccination program is recommended to help prevent diseases that are common among horses. There are many different diseases that can affect a horse, and it is best to consult the veterinarian as to what specific disease should be vaccinated for in the area. The veterinarian can also help with developing a vaccination schedule.

The type of vaccine will vary. Some vaccines provide lifetime protection, while others need an annual booster. The type of vaccine needed will depend on the protection needed and vaccine availability. Most vaccines today have fewer side effects than vaccines of years ago.

Diseases That Horses Can Be Vaccinated Against

There are many different vaccines available; consult the veterinarian as to what is appropriate in the area. The three most common diseases that horses are vaccinated against are influenza, sleeping sickness, and tetanus.

Influenza is a highly contagious disease that affects young horses. The symptoms include high fever, loss of appetite, weakness, depression, rapid breathing, dry cough, and a watery discharge from the eyes and nostrils that is followed by a yellowish nasal discharge. Mortality (or death rate) is low, but recovery can take weeks or even months.

Sleeping sickness (EEE, WEE, and/or VEE) is carried by mosquitoes, and both horses and humans can contract the disease. The symptoms include walking around aimlessly and running into things; depression; grinding

of teeth; and paralysis of the limbs, lips, and bladder. The mortality rate can be as high as 90 percent.

Tetanus (lockjaw) usually occurs as the result of an infected wound. Symptoms can include stiffness around the head and difficulty chewing and swallowing. The stiffness or paralysis progresses throughout the body and muscle spasms can occur. The mortality rate is 80 percent due to the exhaustion and/or paralysis of vital organs.

Viral rhinopneumonitis (Rhino) causes a pregnant mare to abort the foal in the last half of the term. Mares can catch this virus easily from other horses, and the symptoms are similar to a cold or respiratory disease. All horses are susceptible to the virus. Rhino can be prevented by keeping pregnant mares away from others or by keeping them in small groups. Also, weanlings and yearlings should be kept away from pregnant mares.

Strangles (or distemper) is a communicable disease that usually affects younger animals. Symptoms include depression, loss of appetite, high fever, and pus-like discharge from the nostrils. As the disease progresses, glands under the jaw enlarge and become sensitive. These glands can break open, allowing pus to drain out. Strangles can spread to internal organs, but as soon as drainage occurs, glands can heal. However, if it spreads to internal organs, the horse may die. Treatment varies and depends on veterinarian recommendations. The spread of strangles can be controlled by keeping infected animals away from non-infected animals. It can also be prevented by vaccinating the entire herd.

Vaccinations might be needed for other diseases, such as rabies and viral arteritis. Consult the local veterinarian for recommendations.

Ailments Common to Horses

Colic can be fatal if not treated properly. Contact the veterinarian as soon as possible. Symptoms include pawing at the ground, looking nervously at the flanks, continually lying down and getting back up, rolling, sweating, constipation, and the absence of normal intestinal sounds. To avoid intestinal twisting (gastric torsion), the horse should not be allowed to roll or get up and down. Walk the horse slowly, if possible, and don't feed it until the veterinarian arrives.

Equine Science

Equine Infectious Anemia (EIA or Swamp Fever) is a serious blood disease. Symptoms can vary but include high intermittent fever, depression, stiffness, weakness, loss of condition and weight, and swelling. An afflicted animal can die within 2-4 weeks. There is no vaccine available. However, a Coggins test can detect the disease. When a positive Coggins test results, the animal should be quarantined and slaughtered.

Potomac Horse Fever is an often fatal form of diarrhea. Symptoms include fever, depression, loss of appetite, colic, and edema (swelling) of the underline (belly). These symptoms are followed by severe watery diarrhea. Many horses with this ailment develop founder, and the mortality rate is about 30 percent. Horses that contract Potomac Horse Fever are given large amounts of fluids intravenously and medications to reduce the fever and the chance of founder. A vaccine is available, and a veterinarian should be consulted to see if it is needed in the area.

Salmonella is the bacterium that causes symptoms resembling colic, which makes it difficult to diagnose. Suspected horses should be checked by a veterinarian. Prevention practices include keeping feed clean and free from contaminates, along with quarantining of new animals.

Dental Care

Because of the way a horse's teeth wear, they will develop sharp edges on the molars that cause cuts to the gums.

This will cause pain for the horse as it tries to chew its food (mastication process). For this reason, it becomes necessary to float the horse's teeth (file off the sharp edges).

Observe the horse as it eats. Usually, a horse with this problem will eat very slowly, dribble food out of its mouth, salivate excessively, and might have blood mixed with saliva. Wasted feed frequently ends up on the ground. As a result, the horse can lose weight and conditioning. Floating the teeth should be done by a veterinarian or someone with experience and training to prevent injury to the horse's mouth.

Parasites

There are two classifications of parasites—internal and external. A parasite is any form of life that lives off of another. Parasites usually don't kill their host but do cause it to be unthrifty and perform at a lower level.

Symptoms of internal parasite infestation include unthriftiness, rough coat, recessed flanks, distended abdomen, and weakness. Prevention involves a deworming program. To prevent parasites from developing immunity to a specific dewormer, rotate the brands used. There are several different types of dewormers on the market; consult the veterinarian as to what will work the best in the area.

Table 5.1 - Internal Parasites of Horses

Credit: *Controlling Internal Parasites of Horses (G2854)*

Parasite	Location	Ages affected	Injury and symptoms
Strongyles	Larvae: arteries, liver and gut wall Adults: large intestine	All ages but young especially susceptible	Retarded growth, loss of weight, poor appetite, rough hair coat, general weakness, anemia, recurrent colic, death
Ascarids	Larvae: liver and lungs Adults: small intestine	Young under 2 years old	Retarded growth, pot bellied, rough hair coat, colic, pneumonia, death (ruptured intestine)
Bots	Eggs: on hair Larvae: tongue Bots: stomach	All ages	Excitement (by flies), colic, retarded growth, poor condition, death (stomach rupture)
Tapeworms	Adults: junction of small intestine with large intestine	Six months or older	Digestive disturbances

Along with a deworming program, make sure the environment around the horses cuts down on many of the problems associated with parasites. Keep stalls and paddocks clean and free from manure buildup. Dragging of fields (to break up manure piles) and rotating pastures will help lower the parasite population. If possible, avoid feeding horses on the ground where they can ingest parasites with the feed; provide a feeder that is clean and above the ground.

There are about 150 different types of parasites that can affect a horse. Some of the most common internal parasites that affect horses are found in Table 5.1.

External parasites include flies, ticks, mosquitoes, mites, and lice. Some of these external parasites are the source of the internal parasites, such as the botfly. The botfly lays its eggs on the horse's legs and jaw, and the larvae soon enter the horse's mouth and are swallowed. They are eventually passed back out with the feces and the larva mature to the fly stage, where the cycle starts over again. (See Figure 5.1.)

There are several ways to help reduce external parasites, such as keeping the area clean of manure buildup, not having too many horses in one area, and using insecticides that are especially made for horses. Again, it is wise to contact a veterinarian as to what will work best and be the safest.

First Aid

Lesson 8 discusses the contents of a basic first aid kit. First aid is the immediate and temporary aid given for an animal that has been injured or become ill. For any injury involving bleeding, first stop or at least control the bleeding by applying gauze and pressure to the wound. If the wound is slight and bleeding is minimal, applying an antibiotic to the wound might be enough. However, if the wound is worse, a veterinarian should be called to inspect it and decide if stitches are needed.

Foot punctures occur most often. Clean punctures of any dirt or foreign objects. The wound should then be treated with an antiseptic and watched for infection. If the wound has a small opening, enlargement of the opening might be necessary so it will drain. Enlargement of a wound usually requires the services of a veterinarian.

For bites and stings, clean the wound (as with any injury) and apply an antiseptic to the affected area. Determining the cause makes prevention much easier. If the horse acts unusual or has any excess pain or swelling, consult the veterinarian.

For strains, sprains, and swelling, restrict the horse's movements to prevent any further injury and apply cold water to the affected area. These measures help reduce swelling and relieve pain. Apply the cold water intermittently for the first 24 hours, at least. After all the swelling has stopped, warm compresses or liniment can be applied to stimulate the healing process.

If a horse is suspected of founder, the veterinarian should be contacted and the horse should be confined in a stall. Don't give feed and restrict it from drinking large amounts of water until the veterinarian advises otherwise.

Summary

The horse's health is in the owner's hands. It is wise to have a trusted veterinarian nearby to answer any health questions that arise. Also, the veterinarian can help create a health program that will keep animals in good health for years.

Credits

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Equine Science

Credit: *Controlling Internal Parasites of Horses (G2854)*

Figure 5.1 - Life Cycles of Botflies

