

What to do with equine flu?

Steps to take when there is a case in your area or yard

Spot the signs

Flu is a very contagious virus and is transmitted by respiratory droplets, through direct horse-to-horse contact and coughing. One of the really notable features of flu is the very quick spread of signs in a group of horses. The virus can spread large distances in the air and this is one of the reasons why it is very important to control outbreaks as early as possible. Equipment and personnel (hands, clothing, etc.) can also indirectly transmit the virus.

Signs of flu can include:

- Nasal discharge
- Coughing - dry/harsh/hacking
- Fever ($>38.5^{\circ}\text{C}$)
- Lethargy/poor performance
- Loss of appetite

Seek veterinary advice as soon as possible if you have any concerns about your horse.



Reduce the risk

If your horse is fully vaccinated (completed a primary flu vaccine course) they should have good protection against disease. If your horses encounter flu, clinical signs will typically be much less severe, your horse would get better much faster and will also spread less virus, meaning other horses will be less likely to get sick.

Flu commonly occurs shortly after the arrival of new horses onto a premises and yards should have protocols in place for quarantining new arrivals for a period of time (isolate for a minimum of 2 weeks, ideally 3 weeks) before mixing them with resident horses. Before arrival, confirm the new horse is vaccinated against flu (at least had its primary course as a minimum) and discuss other infectious disease screening tests with your vet.

Wash your hand between handling different horses and use designated equipment for each horse. Events are good places for the circulation of infectious diseases. When away from the yard, take your own equipment, including water buckets and water. Avoid communal areas and contact with other horses. Disinfect all equipment including your trailer when you arrive back at the yard.

Be prepared to isolate infected horses. A completely separate stable, ideally at least 25m from other horses and no shared airspace is needed for flu. You must use separate equipment, handlers (or if this is not possible; protective clothing, gloves, separate boots and care for the isolated horse after all other horses) and muck heap when dealing with a horse in isolation. Temporary isolation can be set up by moving other horses away from the stable area/block and using it just for the isolated horse. Taping off the area and using clear signage makes others aware to avoid the area, with disinfectant foot dip and handwashing at the entrance/exit.



Suspect flu?

Call your vet

They can take a swab sample from your horse's nose and throat to confirm if your horse has flu. If your horse has been sick for a while before you call the vet, it can be harder to diagnose your horse correctly. Swabs are best taken early on in the course of the infection.

Eligible samples can be tested for free through the equine influenza surveillance scheme. This scheme is kindly supported by the Horserace Betting Levy Board. If your vet hasn't signed up for the scheme, ask them to contact us.

Making a diagnosis helps to ensure that the best supportive care is given to your horse and that the correct preventative measures are put in place to stop the virus spreading. Not only will you get a diagnosis but you are also helping to monitor equine influenza activity in the UK. This allows us to study how the virus is evolving and helps us to make sure the right strains are recommended for inclusion in future horse vaccines. Ultimately this means that the most effective and up-to-date vaccines are produced to protect your horse from equine flu.



Post diagnosis steps

Your vet will advise you on treatment for the horse that has flu. As with human flu, rest, supportive care and anti-inflammatories are usually all that is needed and with time, your horse will feel better.

Vaccinated horses that have no signs can still carry and spread the virus, but the amount of virus shed should hopefully be at a lower level and for a shorter period of time. These clinically healthy horses should still follow the precautionary measures put in place. Measures to prevent the spread of flu are yard specific and tailor-made by your vet, with assistance from veterinary epidemiologists at EIDS.

Take home messages

- Infected horses will spread the virus through coughing and can shed the virus for up to 10 days. They must be isolated until your vet advises they are no longer infected.
- All horse movements on and off the yard should be stopped.
- Monitor all horses on the yard for clinical signs and record their rectal temperature daily, it should be less than 38.5° C (your vet can advise you on how to do this if you are unsure).
- Booster vaccinate all in-contacts, if they are greater than six months from their last vaccine, as this has been shown to provide horses with even more protection against flu.

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