



Equine Herpes Virus:

What to do about this ever present threat

What is EHV?

Equine herpes virus (EHV) is the cause of a contagious disease that circulates in most parts of the world and can be responsible for serious, widespread illness in horses. Most horses will first encounter the virus as a foal and following recovery, the virus can remain in the body, in an inactive state, known as viral latency. In the future, the latent virus in a horse can 'reactivate' and spread to infect other horses. Reactivation is most commonly associated with times of stress, such as moving yards or going to competitions.

EHV outbreaks occur in the UK and are usually restricted to a single premises, however, multiple premises can be involved following mixing of horses from different yards, such as at equine competitions.

Most horses may have mild respiratory signs or no signs of infection, but, unpredictably, some occurrences can result in widespread infection on a yard and very sick horses.

Spot the signs

EHV-1 and EHV-4 can both cause respiratory signs including a snotty nose, coughing and a temperature.

Most commonly, EHV-1 is the strain that can cause neurological signs such as bladder incontinence, limb weakness, incoordination, recumbency and an inability to rise. EHV-1 can also cause pregnant mares to abort their foal or infected foals to be born weak and the disease is usually fatal in them. EHV-4 is also occasionally associated with abortion as well as respiratory disease.

There is the possibility for infectious horses to spread EHV without them having any obvious clinical signs of disease themselves (i.e. they are subclinically infected), potentially leading to exposure of horses prior to awareness of an infection circulating.

Signs of EHV can include:

- Nasal discharge
- Coughing
- Fever (>38.5°C)
- Lethargy/poor performance
- Loss of appetite
- Neurological signs (ranging from mild to severe, including recumbency, often requiring euthanasia)
- Abortion

How does it spread?

EHV can be transmitted through direct contact between horses, such as touching noses over a stable door, or by indirect contact, such as nasal discharge from a horse being on our hands and then we touch another horse without washing our hands first. The virus can also spread in the air, following a horse coughing or sneezing, but the virus is thought to only be able to spread up to a matter of metres and this method of spread is most likely to occur when horses are in close contact or housed in enclosed airspaces, especially with poor ventilation.

What to do if your horse has had potential contact with a case of EHV

1. Monitor your horses closely

Be vigilant and monitor your horses for any clinical signs of infection, including taking and recording temperatures twice a day

2. Separate out high-risk horses

Identify those horses that may be high risk for being exposed. Keep them separate from other horses on your yard for at least 2 weeks and have dedicated personnel and equipment for them. Take and record their temperatures twice a day. These horses could also have samples taken to determine their current infectious status and sampling may be repeated 2 weeks later, before the horses are reintroduced to the main yard

3. If you have any concerns, contact your vet

Involve your vet immediately if any horses are showing signs of infection. Samples for diagnostic testing should be taken to confirm the diagnosis and control measures should be put in place on your yard to stop the spread of the infection

4. Have good yard hygiene

Implementing sensible everyday hygiene measures will help to reduce the spread of infection on your yard if disease strikes. Examples include keeping horse groups the same (ensure the same horses are stabled and turned out together i.e. have defined yard groups and don't mix them up), wash hands between horses/horse groups, keep separate designated equipment for each horse and group, don't share tack between horses and encourage visiting personnel to wash their hands as a minimum on arrival

Everyday preventive measures to avoid this ever present threat

Design and implement a yard biosecurity plan. Your vet can assist with this and the plan should be pragmatic, feasible and relevant to your risk level, horse population and set up. The biosecurity plan should include:

- The yard vaccination policy

There is a vaccine available for EHV that is licensed to reduce clinical sign severity, duration and viral shedding in instances of respiratory disease and abortion presentations.

However there is currently no vaccine available that is licensed to prevent neurological disease. To discuss vaccination against EHV, talk to your vet.

We do not advise vaccinating horses that have had recent potential contact with a case of EHV

- Approach to sick horses

Plan where they can be isolated, how hygiene measures will be implemented (separate dedicated equipment, muck heap and carers, clear signage and infectious disease control measures) and having thermometers available to monitor temperatures of all in contact horses.

- Approach to new arrivals

Quarantine new arrivals away from other horses, ideally for a minimum of 2 weeks - keep them physically separated, ideally in the isolation facility, and use separate equipment and carers/deal with them last. Monitor them during quarantine; visually checking for nasal and ocular discharges, lymph node enlargement and leaving of food, listening for coughing and twice daily checking and recording of rectal temperature. Contact your vet if any signs of infection are noted.

- Biosecurity measures when out at competitions

Before attending, confirm that your horse is not showing clinical signs of infectious disease and has not had contact with a confirmed or suspect infectious disease case.

Whilst at the event, avoid all direct contact with other horses and indirect contact as much as possible. This can be achieved by taking your own equipment, including water and buckets and horses should not graze communal areas. If using overnight stabling, monitor and record horses' temperatures daily. Ideally one-way systems in stable yards should be in place to avoid horses having direct contact and there should be good separation between horses. Stabling should be subject to a protocol for effective cleaning between different horses.

After equine events, quarantine and monitor returning horses for up to two weeks, if this is not possible, identify these horses as higher risk and try to keep them in a small, separate group. Deal with the group last, closely monitor them and use separate equipment.