

Stop the spread of horse diseases

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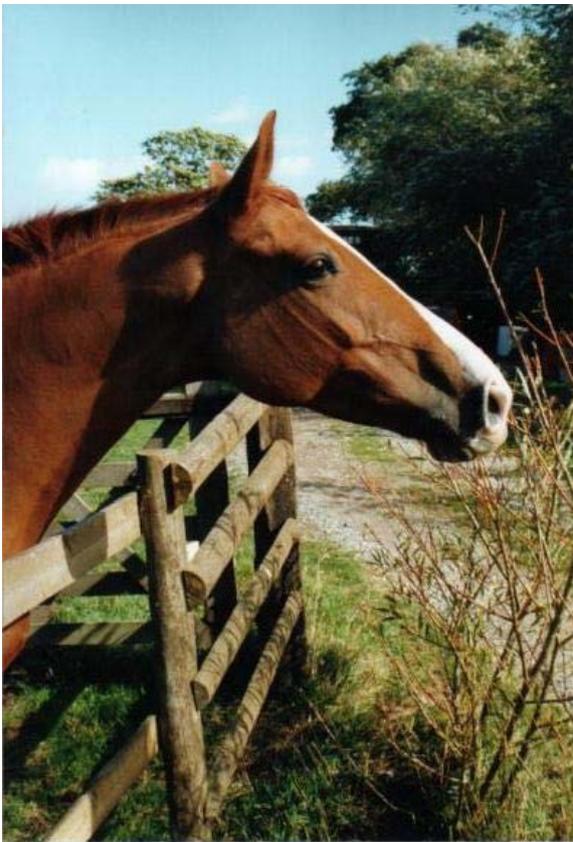


Figure 1. Photo courtesy University of Sydney

The importance of on-farm biosecurity and personal hygiene in protecting horses from disease has been highlighted by the equine influenza outbreak that was first detected in New South Wales in August 2007.

This disease has now been eradicated but biosecurity measures remain important for the ongoing prevention of all infectious disease in horses.

To keep their horses healthy, many horse owners are already following the management practices outlined in this information sheet.

Avoid bringing problems home

Most diseases are introduced to a horse property with the arrival of a new horse that is already infected or is a carrier of a disease, or through a horse coming into contact with a diseased horse – for example, while attending an event.

Handling new arrivals

A pre-purchase examination by a veterinarian is always helpful.

Depending on where the horse has come from, screening tests for specific diseases may also be advisable. Consult your veterinarian for advice.

Isolate new arrivals from resident horses for at least two weeks, and check them daily for any signs of ill health.

While in isolation, horses should be given an effective worm paste (see Primefact 496 Horse health – practical worm control).

Protection when attending events

When you attend competitions or events, always take your own feed bins, water buckets, tack and grooming gear. Sharing such equipment, or using communal water troughs or feeders, can be a source of infection and can spread disease.

Where possible, it is advisable to keep competition horses separate from horses that rarely mix with horses from other properties, and to keep records of horse movements so that these horses and their contacts can be quickly traced in the event of a disease outbreak.

Visiting horse properties

People can introduce diseases if they handle an infected horse and then handle another horse soon afterwards.

If you have been in contact with other horses, you need to thoroughly wash your hands before handling your own horses; also consider changing your clothes.

Check that visitors to your property follow the same biosecurity precautions.



Prevent disease spread

The sooner a problem is detected, the easier it is to deal with. Horses should be checked daily to ensure that they are healthy and injury-free.

Insect control is important, particularly in stables. Ensure good drainage and manure disposal and management to prevent insects such as mosquitos and march flies from breeding.

Stables, equipment and transport vehicles should be cleaned and disinfected regularly. Wipes, rags or towels, for example, can easily transfer infections from horse to horse, and need thorough washing after use. Disinfection and cleaning is particularly important for foaling boxes.

At the first sign of sickness

Any horse that is showing signs of sickness must be isolated.

Ideally, people handling a sick horse should not handle other horses. If this is not possible, make sure you handle the sick horse last, then wash your hands thoroughly and change your clothes before going near any other horses.

Any gear, such as rugs, halters, lead ropes, feed bins, and grooming brushes, should also be kept separate, used only for the sick horse, and then disinfected before being used on other horses.

Studs and large operations

Where horses are stabled, it is advisable to take daily rectal temperatures to monitor for any disease onset.

Properties with a large number of horses segregate their horses by age and use, for example, keeping yearlings separate from older horses. You should always wash your hands between handling groups of horses.

Pregnant mares require special care. They are best separated from other horses, particularly new arrivals, and in large enterprises should be kept in small groups based on foaling date. This will ensure that if abortion due to an infectious agent such as equine herpes virus occurs in a mare, the spread to other pregnant mares will be limited. Any such abortion should always be investigated as soon as possible by a veterinarian.

Boundary fences

Nose-to-nose contact between your horses and those on a neighbouring property may allow an infectious disease to spread. This risk can be managed by keeping horses away from the boundary or using double fencing. A line of trees between the fences is ideal both as windbreak and to improve biosecurity.



Figure 2. The simple measure of washing your hands after handling a horse can help prevent the spread of disease.

Vaccination

Some diseases can be prevented, or their effect minimised, by vaccination.

- All horses should be vaccinated against tetanus.
- Strangles and equine herpes virus (EHV 1 and EHV 4) vaccines are recommended for certain situations. Consult your veterinarian for advice.

When vaccinating against tetanus, strangles and equine herpes virus, give the full vaccination course and regular boosters as recommended.

Always use a new needle and syringe when giving any injection.

Prevent disease from other species

Hendra virus is a rare but often fatal disease of horses which can be spread to humans where it is often fatal. Hendra virus occurs as a 'spill over' infection from the virus's normal wildlife host, the flying fox (fruit bat). Contact between horses and flying foxes should be avoided. Avoid placing horses in a paddock that contains trees attractive to bats for either feeding or roosting. Horse feed bins or watering points should not be placed under trees when there is a risk of bats inhabiting the tree. If possible, place feed and water containers under cover.

Investigating and reporting disease

Consultation with a veterinarian is recommended when any sick horse is identified.

If you notice a high number of sick horses, or any horse with unusual signs, or a horse dies with no obvious cause, immediately call your veterinarian, local RLPB District Veterinarian, NSW DPI Veterinarian, or the Emergency Disease Watch Hotline on 1800 675 888.

If you think your horse has Hendra virus, you should have minimal contact with the horse until Hendra virus has been eliminated as part of the diagnosis.

Further information

Check the NSW DPI website for information on your obligations regarding notifiable diseases in NSW.

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Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (September 2008). However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of New South Wales Department of Primary Industries or the user's independent adviser.

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