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MANAGEMENT MEASURES TO HELP CONTROL DISEASE

What measures can I take to help control disease?

Good management is the key to preventing or controlling the spread of disease. Good management practices aim to keep horses in good condition and in a healthy environment, in order to reduce the risk of introduction and spread of disease, to identify individuals especially at risk and to promote rapid recovery if disease does occur. Management considerations include stabling, feeding, grazing, fencing, vaccinations and worming. You should discuss all aspects with your veterinarian to develop a practical and economic management and preventive medicine program appropriate to your own circumstances.



Do horses require stabling?

Horses and ponies have evolved to be best adapted to outdoor conditions but this is not necessarily true for some domesticated types and this life-style may not suit performance or show type horses. Those who live out at all times should be provided with shelter either in the form of a run-in shed or stable, or some large trees with dense cover.

If your horse is stabled for some or much of the day, a very important feature is good ventilation. Allergic respiratory disease is a constant battle for the stabled domesticated horse. The stable structure should be such that there is free flow of air from front to back and side to side. Alternately there should be adequate height to the ceiling to let stale air rise and then exit through vents. Doors and windows should be fully open in all but the worst weather conditions.

A good deep bed should be provided both for comfort and to help avoid injury and bedding should be clean and dust free to reduce the stimulation of respiratory allergy.

Large barns are basically a single air space and without adequate ventilation, diseases spread rapidly.

Solid, brick or block stabling is always preferable to wooden constructions as they can be more thoroughly and successfully steam cleaned and disinfected.

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What should I feed my horse?

Feeding is a very complex issue. Every horse has basic requirements for water, energy, protein, minerals and vitamins. Water should be clean and freely available at all times. Automatic drinkers should be regularly cleaned and checked that they are functioning correctly. Energy is provided by most foodstuffs, although poor quality grass and hay may contain very low levels of energy, much of which is reasonably difficult to digest. Protein and energy requirements increase during growth (foals and yearlings), pregnancy, lactation and during strenuous exercise,



so grazing may need to be supplemented either with good quality hay or concentrates for performance horses or pregnant mares whose diet consists largely of grass. Vitamin and mineral requirements for unstressed adult horses can often be met entirely by grazing good quality pasture. It is rare for grazing horses to be deficient in a nutrient. Young growing horses, pregnant mares and performance horses may need supplementation in certain situations, but they should be used to address a certain problem, not “just to be on the safe side”. Many vitamin and mineral supplements are available commercially in the form of blocks which can be attached to a wall or placed in the feed tub to be consumed as desired. Other supplements come in liquid or powder form to be added to concentrated feed. Do not be tempted to mix supplements unless you have been advised to do so by your veterinarian or a competent equine nutritionist as it is possible to create imbalances.



Mechanical removal of horse droppings from paddock

How should I care for my paddock?

Fencing should be safe and sturdy and must be regularly checked and maintained for potentially injurious damage. Barbed wire should never be used in horse or pony paddocks and paddocks should be free of all debris, implements and other items which may result in injury.

Droppings should be regularly picked up from paddocks to reduce patchy grazing and also to reduce the risk of parasite infestation. If you have a large enterprise, there are vacuum manure cleaners powered by small tractors that will help to get the job done more effectively.

Removing the horses and allowing sheep or cattle to graze for a short period every six to twelve months encourages more even grass growth and can help weed control. It also helps to reduce the parasite load on the field since horses and ruminants are not affected by the same parasites. Potentially toxic plants such as ragwort or bracken should be removed immediately.

Never overstock your paddocks. Horses will fight and injure themselves if made to live in close proximity, grass will be ruined by overgrazing and horses will be continually reinfested with parasitic worms from each other's' droppings. The stress of overcrowding will also increase their susceptibility to infectious and contagious diseases. Overstocking is a sure sign of bad management.

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Is it necessary to isolate any new horses coming into the stables?

Strict isolation for new horses should be a rule. A small isolation unit should be organized. This should be as far as possible away from the main stable block and paddock area and should consist of one or more stalls and a small paddock. Any new horse should be put into isolation for three weeks on arrival. During this time it should be monitored for signs of disease (raised temperature, depression, inappetence, weight loss, nasal discharge, diarrhea, skin disease). The use of this type of isolation facility helps to reduce the risk of infection, which may be introduced by new horses that may be incubating disease or may be symptomless carriers. Likewise, if a problem occurs the affected horse(s) can be isolated from the rest until a diagnosis is made and recovery complete.

What about vaccinations?

The availability of safe and efficacious vaccines for some equine infectious diseases is one of the success stories of modern veterinary medicine. Speak to your veterinarian to discuss and formulate the best policy for your own needs. The most commonly used vaccines available are:

Tetanus – There is no excuse for any horse not to be fully vaccinated against this invariably fatal disease, caused by *Clostridium tetani*, a bacterium which is widespread in the environment and commonly contaminates wounds. Vaccination ensures freedom from worry every time your horse has an injury. Tetanus vaccine is initially administered on two occasions a month apart and can be first administered from 3 months of age, with annual boosters to follow.

Equine Influenza – This is an unpleasant disease which can cause epidemics of raised temperature, depression, nasal discharge and coughing in horses. It can be fatal in the young. More commonly it can disrupt horse training, racing and performance events and therefore certified vaccination against influenza is a condition of entry to Jockey Club, sales and many other equine premises. Equine Influenza vaccine is initially administered on two occasions a month apart and can be first administered from 9 months of age.

Equine Herpesviruses – These can cause a cold-like respiratory disease which can be very disruptive in race or performance horses in training and can be fatal in young foals. The viruses can also cause abortion in pregnant mares or neurological disease (incoordination or paralysis). Equine Herpesvirus 1 and 4 vaccine is initially administered on two occasions a month apart and can be first administered from 3 months of age. The booster interval differs, depending on the use of the horse.

Other available vaccines are against botulism, rabies, strangles, Potomac Horse Fever and rotavirus infections, which can cause epidemic and life-threatening diarrhea in foals.

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What about worms?

Parasite problems are discussed in more detail in another handout. It is important, however, to have in place a deworming program which involves:

- Rotational paddock management with sheep or cattle and periods of paddock rest
- Regular removal of droppings
- Routine and strategic administration of anthelmintic drugs (deworming medication) and assessment of the worm control program with periodic testing for worm eggs.



Horse paddock being grazed by sheep

All three measures are important in the control of internal parasites, and control will fail if one is unsatisfactory. New horses should be dewormed on arrival and ideally groups of horses which are turned out together should all be dewormed at the same time.



How can I justify the expense of preventive medicine?

The question should really be how can I justify not budgeting for the expense of preventive medicine! There is never any question that prevention is better than cure and the costs of unsatisfactory management in relation to horse health and welfare can be very high. Apart from important welfare considerations, the costs of diagnosis, treatment, recuperation, time off and return to performance are much higher than satisfactory vaccination and worm control. Discuss this with your veterinarian who will help you

formulate an effective program tailored to the individual needs of you and your horses.

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