



VACCINATIONS

The question of vaccinations is often confusing. Which vaccinations do my horses need? How much is too many? How many are too few? We hope this hand-out helps with some of those questions.

Which vaccinations does my horse need?

Fortunately, there are vaccinations available for many equine diseases. They are effective and safe, and you may have the desire to use every vaccine available, but this usually isn't necessary. Vaccination should be based on risk, and not all horses share the same level of risk. Horses that travel and show a lot are at higher risk for certain diseases (such as influenza), and pregnant mares need protection against diseases that are not a problem for the non-pregnant.

Why are there so many recommended vaccinations?

You may never get vaccinations for yourself, so why does your horse need so many? Well, humans and horses lead very different lifestyles. We know the risks of many diseases and how to avoid them, but horses don't. They don't know to report suspect incidences and seek help. If they see a racoon acting strangely, they don't know to avoid it. They don't know to cover up and wear repellent during mosquito season. Eating out of another horse's feed tub or rubbing noses with a sick horse seems very natural to them. It is difficult to eliminate the risk of exposure to disease, so we rely on vaccines to eliminate developing the disease.

Following are diseases common to our area that have safe vaccines available

Rabies: Everyone knows the dangers of rabies, and New Jersey and Pennsylvania are high endemic areas for it. New Jersey has about one case of equine rabies a year. Because it is contagious to people and always fatal in humans and horses, we recommend that every horse, regardless of situation, have a rabies vaccination.

Encephalitis: There are three strains of encephalitis common in New Jersey- Eastern, Western and West Nile. The encephalitis vaccination is a combination of antigens that protects against all three strains. The West Nile strain has been the most common in New Jersey, but the Eastern strain is on the rise and, unfortunately, it is the most deadly of the three. All horses need to be vaccinated against encephalitis.

Tetanus: Horses are extremely sensitive to the toxin that causes tetanus. The same amount of toxin that will kill a horse would have no effect on a cat or even a mouse. Couple this with the fact that horses are highly prone to injury (some more than others, you know who you are) and you have a very serious situation. In most cases of tetanus, it is very difficult or impossible to find the original wound or puncture that introduced the disease. We recommend that all horses be vaccinated against tetanus.

Botulism: The organism that causes botulism is closely related to the one that causes tetanus and produces a toxin so potent that a teaspoon of it could kill every horse in the country. Botulism is rare, but because treatment is prolonged (months), expensive and not very successful, we recommend vaccination for all horses.

Rhinopneumonitis and Influenza: These two respiratory diseases are not related, but they are usually considered in the same way. While rarely fatal, these diseases are highly contagious horse to horse and have very long convalescent periods. Since the viruses for both diseases are primarily spread by direct contact with another sick horse, vaccination should be based on risk. If you are often around strange horses, such as at shows or trail rides, we recommend vaccination. If your horses are retired and never leave your back yard, their risk is very low and vaccination is not necessary.

Strangles: Strangles is another highly contagious respiratory disease, but is caused by a bacterium instead of a virus. It is easily spread horse to horse and on inanimate objects such as hands, boots and feed tubs. Once in a barn, strangles tends to linger for months. Still, it is one of the diseases we vaccinate according to risk. If your horse never comes in contact with other horses, the need to vaccinate is very low.

Potomac Horse Fever: Potomac Horse Fever is a strange disease with an even stranger life cycle, and is very limited by area. We never see cases south of Trenton, but the disease is quite common north of Trenton. If you live in an endemic area, vaccination is necessary; otherwise, it is not.

There are other vaccines for diseases we don't really see in this country (such as Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis), and other contagious diseases (such as EPM and EIA), that have no vaccine approved for use in this country. We deal with those in other ways. For more information on vaccinations, see the chart on our website under Preventative Medicine.

Foundation Equine will be happy to help you develop a vaccination program for your horses. The easiest way is to call us, because we need to ask a lot of questions before formulating your program.