

Equine Influenza Q&A

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Q: What is equine influenza?

A: Equine influenza is the second-most-commonly-diagnosed infectious disease of the respiratory tract of horses (equine herpesvirus type 4 is first). While herpesvirus is on everyone's mind, equine influenza outbreaks are more common than herpesvirus outbreaks. Equine influenza is generally caused by the orthomyxovirus equine influenza A type 2 H3N8 subtype.

Q: What are the clinical signs of equine influenza?

A: A horse with equine influenza might appear lethargic; not be interested in eating; has a cough; have a watery discharge from the nose; have enlarged lymph nodes; have a fever.

Q: How is equine influenza spread?

A: Equine influenza is highly contagious. The virus spreads rapidly through groups of horses when they cough and droplets contain virus are spread in the air, or the virus can be spread by fomites (things such as human hands, bits, horse vans/trailers, and other equipment).

Q: How far can the virus spread from a horse cough?

A: Dr. Tom Chambers of the Gluck Equine Research Center said, "My advice is to consider that equine influenza can spread 50 feet upwind and 100 feet downwind."

Q: How serious is equine influenza to the health of my horse?

A: Because equine influenza is so easily spread, many horses that travel or are in proximity to other horse populations (such as for competitions or trail rides) can be exposed to equine influenza. In 2021, there were equine influenza outbreaks in more than 30 states. There have been serious outbreaks of equine influenza around the world in recent years, including a 2022 outbreak at the BLM wild horse facility in Colorado where 144 horses died of equine influenza.

When a horse has equine influenza, veterinarians recommend one week of rest for every day of fever. It is also recommended that horses be rested for at least two weeks after the horse stops coughing.

Q: How can I protect my horse against equine influenza?

A: Vaccination is the basis for protecting horses against equine influenza. Other measures include quarantining horses entering your facility for at least two weeks; disinfect horse trailers/vans that have transported horses "foreign" to your horse; avoid sharing equipment such as buckets, bits, or feed tubs; thoroughly wash skin or clothing that might have been exposed to equine influenza virus; call your veterinarian immediately if your horse exhibits signs of equine influenza.

Q: Are equine influenza vaccines effective?

A: Similar to the human influenza, equine influenza virus can “mutate” or “drift.” The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH), formerly the Office International des Epizooties (OIE, which meets annually to review equine influenza’s status worldwide and make vaccine inclusion recommendations) keeps tabs on whether the virus has mutated and provides that information to the industry and vaccine manufacturers.

Vaccinated horses that are exposed to equine influenza either won’t get clinically sick or won’t get as sick as unvaccinated horses; the influenza virus won’t replicate as much in the horse; and risk for disease transmission is decreased.

Note that Boehringer Ingelheim’s VETERA XP vaccines contain the equine influenza strains recommended by the OIE Expert Surveillance Panel on Equine Influenza.

For more information on Vetera vaccines visit https://www.bi-vetmedica.com/species/equine/products/vetera_vaccines.html.