

## Disease risks from abroad

With increasing movement of horses worldwide and climate warming, diseases which are common in tropical and subtropical countries can be found travelling north; demonstrated by the recent outbreaks of Bluetongue and Schmallenberg disease in the British farm population. The threat of a devastating disease like African horse sickness entering the UK and killing a

large proportion of the horse population is so real that the government has already put regulations in place for managing a possible outbreak. The risk of the entry of a new equine disease into the UK has the potential to not only cause welfare issues and equine deaths but the possibility of large scale disruption of equine events and activities of the scale seen in the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001.

Horse owners and veterinarians should be vigilant and keep exotic diseases in their mind when dealing with a sick animal or sudden unexplained death. It is imperative that these situations are recognised in the earliest possible stage and appropriate biosecurity measures are put into place to minimise spread.



### African Horse Sickness:

- caused by African horse sickness virus;
- midges transfer the virus from infected to non-infected horse;
- clinical signs vary, depending on the form, mostly fatal;
- respiratory form - fever and severe respiratory problems;
- cardiac form - fever and generalised swelling (oedema);
- fever form - high temperature and mild symptoms, usually only in donkeys;
- no effective treatment;
- prevention involves midge avoidance - stabling during high midge activity (dusk until dawn), fly sheets, insect repellent, avoid stagnant water;
- vaccines not licensed in the UK.



**A HORSE SUFFERING FROM AFRICAN HORSE SICKNESS SHOWING FLUID SWELLING OF THE CHEST AREA**

### KEY POINTS

- The entry into the UK of diseases such as African horse sickness and West Nile virus are an ever present threat.
- Owners and vets must be vigilant and keep exotic diseases in their mind when dealing with a sick animal or unexplained death.
- Early recognition and good biosecurity practices are essential to limit spread.
- Suspected cases must be reported to Animal Health (AHVLA) department of DEFRA.

### West Nile virus:

- mosquitoes transmit the virus usually from infected wild birds to non-infected horses and/or humans;
- signs are fever, depression, neurological signs, death in 30% of horses with clinical signs;
- no specific treatment available, only supportive care;
- prevention is by vaccination and mosquito control and avoidance;
- two vaccines are licenced and available in the UK for high risk horses and yards;
- note that disease affects birds, humans and horses.

### Equine Piroplasmosis (EP):

- Caused by a protozoa, called *Theileria equi* and *Babesia caballi*;
- transmitted via infected tick;
- signs are fever, depression, anaemia, jaundice, dark urine, abortion;
- treatment is available but does not always clear infection and very toxic to horses/donkeys;
- prevention involves tick control.

**SEE ALSO FACTSHEETS ON EQUINE INFECTIOUS ANAEMIA (EIA), EQUINE VIRAL ARTERITIS (EVA) AND CONTAGIOUS EQUINE METRITIS.**



**TWO VACCINES ARE LICENCED AND AVAILABLE FOR HIGH RISK HORSES AND YARDS**



**ISOLATING AND TESTING NEW HORSES PRIOR TO INTRODUCTION ONTO THE YARD HELPS LIMIT THE SPREAD OF CONTAGIOUS AND EXOTIC DISEASE**

### PREVENTING EXOTIC DISEASE:

- comply with the regulations for health testing associated with the importation of horses;
- isolate all new horses and those returning to the yard after competing abroad for a period of at least three weeks in well separated quarantine facilities;
- ensure horses coming in from abroad are tested for potentially infectious diseases prior to introduction to the yard;
- ensure good insect control with fine mesh on isolation facilities;
- control and avoid midges and mosquitos with insect repellents and fly sheets;
- avoid standing water and site muck heap away from the stables to reduce midge/mosquito numbers.



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