



Herpes

Herpes virus is a common infection of horses and ponies. Thankfully, the majority of infections of Herpes Virus 1 and 4 (HV1 and 4) produce few symptoms, apart from what is commonly known as 'loss of performance' or mild respiratory infections similar to a common cold in humans. In horsey parlance, this is known as 'The Virus'.

Unfortunately herpes can also cause more nasty symptoms, including virus abortion in mares, and occasionally transient unsteadiness and in-coordination because of its effect on the spinal cord. Sadly, sometimes this unsteadiness and in-coordination can progress to the horse being paralyzed, which may necessitate the horse being put down.

Serious outbreaks of herpes virus occur sporadically with occasional fatalities. However, to put matters into perspective, *Herpes virus will, at some stage, affect many horses and ponies in the UK*

Transmission

Herpes is a virus which spreads relatively slowly, usually by direct contact between individuals. The most common route is via nose to nose contact associated with the infected discharges, although it is likely that persons can physically carry the infection on their clothes and with buckets and other items shared between horses. Aborted foals that are infected with herpes virus are a potent source of infection for other horses, but this of course will only rarely be a practical problem.

Preventing the spread of herpes

In the face of an outbreak, it is important to limit the spread of the infection by taking appropriate hygiene measures. This includes physical separation of horses, either individually or as groups depending on what is practical in the stable situation, utilizing sensible hygienic precautions with regard to clothing, and avoiding sharing equipment such as troughs and feeding buckets etc. Buckets of disinfectant outside a stable are useful in avoiding trailing infected material around a stable yard.

Take appropriate hygiene measures to limit the spread of infection

Unlike influenza virus, which spreads rapidly throughout a yard in a matter of one to two days and is a true airborne infection, herpes virus spreads gradually around a premises. By the time herpes is detected in a yard, it is quite likely that there has already been some degree of infection between individuals. To discover the infectious status of individuals, it may be necessary to take blood samples to indicate exposure to the virus. Individual samples are of use in assessing the degree of spread of infection within a given stables and in individual horses, paired samples taken two weeks apart can indicate recent infection.

Vaccination

It is important to understand that herpes vaccines need to be administered every six months and are only really effective where the majority of the horses on any given premises are all vaccinated. This suppresses the level of infection in the population. Pregnant mares are vaccinated even more frequently, roughly at one to two month intervals at the end of their pregnancy, usually at month 5,7 and 9.

Vaccination is not usually recommended immediately in the face of an active outbreak of herpes, but more as a strategic tool to suppress virus activity in a yard.

