

Horse Council Encouraging EEE, WNV Vaccinations

The American Horse Council wants horse owners to remember that it is the time of year to vaccinate their horses to guard against serious diseases.

With warmer months come mosquitoes and other vectors that can spread viral diseases that seriously affect horses. Encephalitis diseases, such as eastern equine encephalitis (EEE) and West Nile virus (WNV), are spread by mosquitoes and are often experienced during the summer months. Vaccinating now ensure that horses have strengthened immune system when the virus starts circulating in the mosquito population.

“Diseases like EEE and West Nile virus can significantly affect horses. Fortunately, they can be prevented with vaccinations,” says Jay Hickey, president of the American Horse Council. “Horse owners need to remain vigilant in their vaccination programs.”

EEE is a viral disease of horses that is very often fatal. Mortality rates are commonly reported above 90% in horses affected with EEE. Despite its name, eastern equine encephalomyelitis also affects humans.

West Nile virus is another encephalitic disease of importance to horse owners. It also can be fatal in horses, but the mortality rate is significantly lower that what is seen with EEE, generally between 30% and 40%. Humans also can be infected with WNV.

Although humans can contract both diseases, horses play no role in the transmission of either virus to humans. Mosquitoes and birds are primarily responsible for the spread of both viruses; mosquitoes feed on the blood of infected birds and spread the virus when they bite another host animal such as a horse or human. Although humans and horses can become ill from the infection, the level of virus in their blood is too low to infect mosquitoes so they are unable to spread the disease either directly human-to-human, horse-to-horse, horse-to-human, or vice versa.

In 2005, the U.S. Department of Agriculture confirmed 1,075 equine cases of West Nile virus nationwide. The largest number of cases was reported in California, with 456 confirmed cases; Idaho had the next largest number of cases at 114.

“An effective vaccine for horses is available, and horse owners are encouraged to vaccinate their horses regularly against these diseases,” says Dr. Michael Short, Equine Programs Manger for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Division of Animal Industry.

“We often hear from horse owners asking why it is necessary to vaccinate our horses, as ‘they don’t get these diseases anyway’,” observed Any Mann, AHC’s Health and Regulatory Affairs director. “The truth is, little evidence of infection is seen when horses are vaccinated because their immune systems are protected and able to fight infection if expose to these viruses.

However, when horses are not vaccinated, their immune systems don't have the necessary tools to fight the virus and subsequently the number of cases goes up." The increased incidence of disease includes an increase in virus related deaths in horses as well.

Published by the National Institute for Animal Agriculture in cooperation with
USDA/APHIS, Spring/Summer 2006