

# EQUINE HERPES VIRUS: WHAT TO DO ABOUT THIS EVER-PRESENT THREAT

## WHAT IS EHV?

Equine herpes virus (EHV) is the cause of a contagious disease that circulates in most parts of the world and can be responsible for serious, widespread illness in horses. Most horses will first encounter the virus as a foal and following recovery, the virus can remain in the body, in an inactive state, known as viral latency. In the future, the latent virus in a horse can 'reactivate' and spread to infect other horses. Reactivation is most commonly associated with times of stress, such as moving yards or going to competitions.

EHV outbreaks occur in the UK and are usually restricted to a single premises, however, multiple premises can be involved following mixing of horses from different yards, such as at equine competitions.

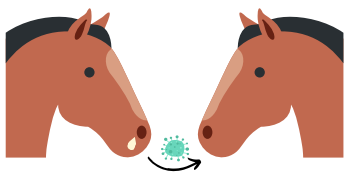
Most horses may have mild respiratory signs or no signs of infection, but, unpredictably, some occurrences can result in widespread infection on a yard and very sick horses.



## SPOTTING THE SIGNS

EHV-1 and EHV-4 can both cause respiratory signs including a snotty nose, coughing and a temperature.

## HOW DOES IT SPREAD?



EHV can be transmitted through direct contact between horses, such as touching noses over a stable door, or by

indirect contact, such as nasal discharge from a horse being on our hands and then we touch another horse without washing our hands first.

EHV can also spread in the air, following a horse coughing or sneezing, but the virus is thought to only be able to spread up to a matter of metres. This method of spread is most likely to occur when horses are in close contact or housed in enclosed airspaces, especially with poor ventilation.

There is the possibility for infectious horses to spread EHV without having any obvious clinical signs of disease (i.e. they are subclinically infected), potentially leading to exposure of horses prior to awareness of an infection circulating.

### SIGNS OF EHV CAN INCLUDE:

- **Nasal discharge**
- **Coughing**
- **Fever ( $\geq 38.5$  C)**
- **Lethargy/poor performance**
- **Loss of appetite**
- **Neurological signs** - ranging from mild to severe, including recumbency often requiring euthanasia
- **Abortion/neonatal foal death**

Most commonly, EHV-1 is the strain that can cause neurological signs such as bladder incontinence, limb weakness, incoordination, recumbency and an inability to rise.

EHV-1 can also cause pregnant mares to abort their foal or infected foals to be born weak and the disease is usually fatal in them. EHV-4 is also occasionally associated with abortion as well as respiratory disease.



# WHAT TO DO IF YOUR HORSE HAS CONTACT WITH A CASE OF EHV

1. **Monitor your horses closely:** Be vigilant and monitor your horses for any clinical signs of infection, including taking and recording temperatures twice daily.
2. **Separate high-risk horses:** Identify those horses that may be at high risk for being exposed. Keep them separate from other horses on your yard for at least 2 weeks and have dedicated personnel and equipment for them. Take and record their temperatures twice a day. These horses could also have samples taken to determine their current infectious status, and sampling may be repeated 2 weeks later, before the horses are reintroduced to the main yard.
3. **If worried, contact your vet:** Involve your vet immediately if any horses are showing signs of infection. Samples for diagnostic testing should be taken to confirm the diagnosis, control measures should be implemented on your yard to stop the spread of the infection.
4. **Have good yard hygiene:** Implementing sensible everyday hygiene measures will help to reduce the spread of infection on your yard if disease strikes. Examples include keeping horse groups the same (ensure the same horses are stabled and turned out together, i.e. have defined yard groups and don't mix them up), wash hands between horses/horse groups, keep separate designated equipment for each horse and group, don't share tack between horses and encourage visiting personnel to wash their hands as a minimum on arrival.



## YOUR BIOSECURITY PLAN



**Have a yard vaccination policy:** An EHV vaccine is licensed to reduce clinical sign severity, duration and viral shedding of respiratory disease and abortion presentations. However, there is currently no licensed vaccine available to prevent neurological disease. We do not advise vaccinating horses that have had recent potential contact with a case of EHV.



**Plan how to manage sick horses:** Plan where they can be isolated, how hygiene measures will be implemented (separate dedicated equipment, muck heap and carers) and have thermometers available to twice daily monitor temperatures of all in contact horses.



**Plan how to manage new arrivals:** Quarantine new arrivals for a minimum of 2 weeks - keep them physically separated, and use separate equipment and carers/deal with them last. Monitor them during quarantine; visually checking for nasal and ocular discharges, lymph node enlargement and leaving of food. Listen for coughing and record rectal temperature twice daily. **Contact your vet if any signs of infection are noted.**



**Use biosecurity measures when out competing:** Avoid direct contact with other horses and indirect contact as much as possible. Take your own equipment, including water and buckets, and don't graze horses in communal areas. If stabling overnight, monitor and record rectal temperature twice daily and have good separation from other horses. Ensure all old bedding was removed and the stable disinfected between horses. Ideally quarantine horses on returning home and monitor for up to two weeks (temperature and clinical signs).

## HOW TO AVOID THIS EVER-PRESENT THREAT

Design and implement a yard biosecurity plan to include everyday preventive measures which can help you avoid the ever-present threat of EHV.

Your vet can assist with this and the plan should be pragmatic, feasible and relevant to your risk level, horse population and set up.



[BEF advice notes](#)



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