

Equine Flu Q&A for Horse Owners. Updated 12.02.19

Is it usual to have equine flu in the UK?

Equine flu is 'endemic' in the UK which means it is always here. However there have been very few diagnosed cases in the last few years and they haven't made the news. Flu is not a notifiable disease, so there isn't a complete picture of how many cases there are each year, although the Animal Health Trust has a free surveillance scheme which tracks the number of outbreaks each year. Before January 2019 was over, there had already been as many cases in Britain as there were in the whole of 2018.

Is equine flu harmful to horses?

It can have serious health implications for unvaccinated horses, or horses which are vulnerable in another way, and they can become very ill. Horses whose boosters are up to date should only experience mild symptoms. However, affected horses are still infectious and able to spread the disease. Even in unvaccinated horses, flu does not usually cause life-threatening illness as has been evidenced by the outcomes of previous cases in the current outbreak. However, sadly one unvaccinated horse in this outbreak has been euthanised which is a reminder of the importance of vaccination and appropriate yard hygiene/biosecurity.

Which strain of equine flu is causing this outbreak?

It is known as Florida clade 1 and is a strain not seen in the UK since 2009, although British horses are vaccinated against it.

Information on vaccine strains <https://www.aht.org.uk/disease-surveillance/equiflunet/equine-influenza-vaccines>

How does this outbreak compare to that in Australia in 2007?

Australia does not have equine flu and horses are not vaccinated against it. As there is usually no flu in Australia, there is also no immunity in the general horse population from exposure to it, which is why the effects were so devastating when the outbreak took place in 2007. This is obviously a very different situation to the UK, where flu is endemic, and where horses are routinely vaccinated so most adult horses have some immunity.

Why have vaccinated horses been affected?

As with human 'flu disease can occur despite vaccination. The flu virus is always changing slightly so it is not uncommon for the flu vaccination not to be 100% effective however, as in this outbreak, the vaccines are reducing severity of clinical signs and shortening how long a horse is unwell for and reinforcing the importance of vaccination.

What can I do to protect my horse?

The steps to take are very simple. Make sure your vaccinations are up to date and if you have any concerns, call your vet for advice. Make sure that any new horses on your yard are kept in isolation from the existing horses to prevent any possible spread for a period of time (ideally isolation facilities for 3 weeks). Equine flu droplets can be spread up to 100 metres through the air and on tools, equipment and clothing so make sure that you do not accidentally transfer the virus in any of these ways.

Is vaccination still effective when flu is around?

Yes, with equine flu, vaccination is effective even in the face of an outbreak. Speak to your vet about vaccinations.

What's the treatment for infected horses? How long will it last?

Horses will need rest and may need medication as prescribed by your vet. Make sure infected horses are isolated to prevent spread, your vet will advise.

If your horse is vaccinated, it will be ill for less time, but will need to rest and may be off work for a few weeks in order to recover properly. If the horse is not vaccinated illness can last for considerably longer and be more severely affected.

Is there any risk to human health?

No, this virus cannot be passed on to humans.

Will shows and competitions be cancelled?

Equestrian organisations are carefully monitoring the situation and assessing all the risks. They are taking responsible and proportionate action. With the information that is currently available it is unlikely that events will be asked to cancel but it is possible this situation may change. Any cancellations will be on the advice of specialist vets, and it will be in the interests of minimising spread of the virus and risk to the health of the UK's horses. Careful consideration is being made of all the available facts, alongside advice received from experts in equine influenza and epidemiology that have experience of managing previous outbreaks. BEF's own advisors include Jenny Hall - Chair of BEF's Equine Infectious Disease Emergency Response Committee; John McEwen - Director of Equine Sports Science and Medicine and Jane Nixon - BEF Board Director and Veterinary Consultant.

What is the incubation period, before signs of equine flu appear?

This is usually 1-5 days before the horse shows signs. Taking a horse's temperature is the best way of spotting changes early and being able to respond quickly. If the temperature is greater than 38.5°C then seek immediate veterinary attention.

The advice below has been put together by BEVA in consultation with the Animal Health Trust. It reflects the current situation and may be subject to change.

Equine flu is always present in the UK. We currently appear to be seeing flu in some horses who have been vaccinated as well as in unvaccinated horses and this means that we should all be taking some extra precautions "just in case".

Why should I vaccinate?

- The more you do to reduce the risk of spreading any contagious disease between horses the better... but doing what you reasonably can is better than doing nothing.
- Vaccinated horses are likely to be less severely affected by flu and are likely to get better more quickly than unvaccinated horses.
- Unvaccinated horses present a risk not just to themselves but to all the horses around them.

What should I do on the yard?

- Keep a look out for the signs of flu – coughing, snotty nose, loss of appetite, lethargy – and call your vet if you think any horses are showing signs.
- If your horses are at a higher risk (ie they haven't been vaccinated or there is an outbreak of flu at a neighbouring yard) then you could also look out for raised temperatures (>38.5°C)
- Ask your vet to vaccinate your horse if it has not been vaccinated before or if its last booster vaccination was more than 6 months ago. It is recommended that the vaccine used reflects the virus type currently being seen in the outbreak (Florida Clade 1)
- You should plan to give your horse a few quiet days after vaccination (immunity steadily increases over 7-10 days following vaccination)
- If your horse is at higher risk you should discuss with your vet whether more frequent boosters would be appropriate.

Should I stop visitors coming to our yard?

- Visitors such as vets, farriers, dental technicians, saddle fitters, physios etc should take special precautions as they could transmit disease between horses and between yards.
- Before they arrive, visitors should call to ask whether there are any sick horses on the yard. If any horses are showing signs that might be flu or if the disease has been confirmed then you should postpone all but essential visits.
- Even if all your horses appear fine your visitors should clean their hands (ideally with an alcohol based antimicrobial gel type product), clean their tools (especially dental technicians) and check their clothing for obvious contamination (changing it if required).
- If your visitors' vehicles have not been in contact with your horses then there is no requirement for the vehicle to be washed down.
- As good practice you should keep a record of all visitors to the yard.

Should I go to competitions/events/training?

- Do not take your horse anywhere if there are sick horses on your yard
- Check that the venue is happy to have you and that there are no sick horses reported by the venue.
- Check that the venue has a policy that visiting / kept horses are vaccinated.
- Whilst at the venue, keep your horse(s) out of contact with other horses and avoid sharing of buckets or any other equipment
- When you return you should thoroughly clean your lorry or trailer (ideally not next to your horses)

What about deliveries to our yard?

- Try to keep feed, forage or other delivery vehicles and drivers separate from the horses

What about sending equipment away?

- If you are sending tack or clippers for repair then you should clean them first and the repairer should routinely wipe them over with an antimicrobial product before returning them. Rugs can be sent for washing as normal (with the worst of the muck cleared off first)

