

Vaccination can help limit the spread of the virus and decrease severity of symptoms

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/VCHA

## SPECIAL REPORT

# Equine flu:

# Fighting the threat

The equestrian world is on high alert after multiple confirmed cases of equine flu. **Stephanie Anthony** investigates what this means for you — and why every horse owner must act now

**F**OLLOWING MYRIAD outbreaks of equine influenza (EI) in the UK recently — including in horses who have been vaccinated — vets, scientists and industry professionals are warning that all horse owners must act now.

Flu is highly contagious. It can travel up to 5km in the air and is easily passed on via human touch and clothing. Yet it is estimated that less than 50% of the UK's horses are vaccinated against flu.

When *Your Horse* magazine went to press, cases were confirmed in 18 counties. Florida clade 1 is a new strain of flu in the UK, although it is routinely vaccinated against in America. Most UK horses receive European vaccines, which is why multiple vaccinated horses have fallen ill with flu.

A country-wide cancellation of all race meetings, including point-to-points, lasted over a week in February. There have also been outbreaks in Europe, while The Donkey Sanctuary warned of a potential epidemic in Africa after Nigeria declared multiple cases.

But what does this mean for the average horse owner? In short, every horse is at risk. If it's been longer than six months since your horse's last booster, latest advice is to have it done now. Speak to your vet.

According to Richard Freeman from insurance broker Lycetts, having an unvaccinated horse may invalidate any insurance policy you have.

"It is commonly a condition that the insured horse must be vaccinated," he says.

## How to act

**The British Equestrian Federation (BEF) released the following advice to help prevent further flu outbreaks:**

- 1** If your horse isn't vaccinated, start now.
- 2** If you see any symptoms (see box, below), or your horse has been in contact with infected horses, isolate him and call your vet immediately.
- 3** Do not travel to competitions if your horse is showing symptoms or has been in contact with infected horses.
- 4** If your horse's last vaccination was more than six months ago, book a booster.

## KNOW THE SIGNS

- High temperature (>38.5°C)
- Cough
- Snotty nose
- Enlarged glands (*under the lower jaw*)
- Swollen or sore eyes
- Lethargy
- Loss of appetite
- Swelling in the lower legs

*If you notice any of these in your horse, no matter how minor, consult your vet.*



**What's the risk to your horse? Use the chart inside the front cover**

Race meetings across the UK were cancelled for more than a week

**5** Ask your vet about using a vaccine that contains Florida clade 1 (for example, ProteqFlu or Equilis Prequenza). This strain is endemic to North/South America and more virulent than the European version.

"We are issuing our advice as a precautionary measure and are closely monitoring the situation," says Matt Williams, BEF head of communications.

Simple measures help, such as asking everyone who enters your yard to disinfect their hands and shoes before approaching horses. Changing clothes after contact with other horses is also wise. If you take your horse off the yard (hacking for example), don't let him come into contact with others.

## Exposing the risk

Equine influenza is transmitted by contact with the virus — either from infected horses, in the air, or via clothes, tack and tools. So even if your horse never leaves the yard, he is still at risk of exposure to the virus.

Signs of infection appear as quickly as two days after initial exposure, and horses remain infectious for up to 10 days following the onset of symptoms.

EI is rarely fatal, but some — youngsters, veterans, sick horses and mares in foal, for example — are more vulnerable. While no vaccine is 100% effective, immunisation is effective in limiting the spread of the virus and decreasing the severity of infection.

"It's worrying how few equines are vaccinated against flu," says *Your Horse* editor Aimi Clark. "One of the biggest misconceptions is that horses who don't compete or never leave their yard don't need to be vaccinated. But given how far flu can travel by air, and how easily it is spread by people, there's still a risk. My advice would be to speak to a vet as soon as possible."

■ For more information about equine influenza go to [bef.co.uk](http://bef.co.uk).

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