Fact Sheet

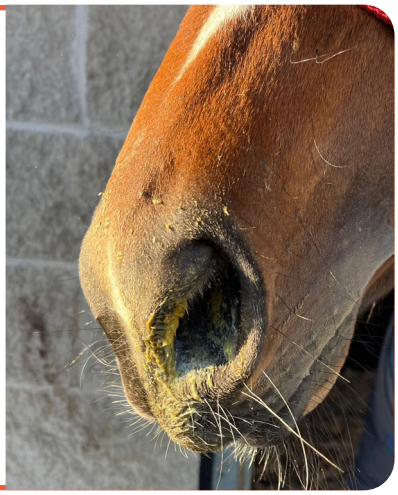
Equine Influenza

What is equine influenza?

Equine influenza, often referred to as equine flu, is a highly contgious viral respiratory disease. The virus specifically targets the respiratory system and spreads rapidly trhough airborne particles, direct contact and contaminated equipment. While the virus rarely causes death, it can significantly impact the health and performance of affected animals.

We are often complacent about this disease because we expect horses to be vaccinated. However, should a major outbreak occur with a new virus strain then unvaccinated horses will suffer severe and potentially fatal disease and vaccinated horses may also be affected.

Multiple small outbreaks happen every year in the UK, and major outbreaks have occurred before and may well happen again.



How is equine influenza spread?

Aerosolised respiratory droplets:
When an infected horse coughs or sneezes, it releases tiny droplets containing the virus into the air. Nearby horses can inhale these droplets, leading to infection.

Direct contact:
Horses can catch the virus through direct contact with infected horses, especially if they touch noses or engage in close physical interactions.

Contaminated surfaces:
The virus can also survive on surfaces like grooming kits, water troughs, feed buckets and human clothing.

Human transmission:
Humans can inadvertently carry the virus on their hands, clothing, or equipment from one horse to another, facilitating the spread of the disease.

Shared airspaces:
In environments like stables, barns, or transport vehicles where horses are kept in close quarters, the virus can spread quickly through shared airspaces.

Clinical signs

- High temperature: Typically reaches 102–106°F (38.9–41.1°C)
- Persistent cough: Lasting weeks beyond other symptoms
- Nasal discharge: Starts clear, becomes thicker
- Lethargy: Horses reluctant to move or exercise
- Loss of appetite: Reduced eating due to discomfort
- Swollen lymph nodes: Tender submandibular nodes
- Increased respiratory rate: Rapid breathing from infection

Recovery usually takes 2–3 weeks; severe cases affect young, old, or weak horses. Early detection and care are crucial to manage and prevent spread.

How is equine influenza diagnosed?

Equine influenza is diagnosed through a combination of clinical evaluation and laboratory testing to accurately identify the presence of the virus in horses. The initial diagnosis often begins with the observation of characteristic clinical signs. For a definitive diagnosis, vets rely on a range of diagnostic tests, with the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) being one of the most widely used methods due to its high sensitivity and rapid turnaround time. In addition to PCR, serological testing is another important tool in diagnosing equine influenza. These tests can provide information about recent or past exposure to the virus, helping to establish whether the horse is currently infected or has been exposed in the past.

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How to prevent equine influenza

Preventing equine influenza involves vaccination, biosecurity measures and careful management:

Vaccination: Regularly vaccinate horses as recommended by your vet.

Biosecurity:

- Quarantine: Isolate new horses upon arrival
- Isolation: Separate sick horses from healthy ones
- Hygiene: Clean and disinfect equipment and spaces regularly
- Limit contact: Minimise interaction between horses from different locations
- Monitoring: Watch for signs of respiratory illness (coughing, fever) and isolate affected horses promptly

Travel/event management: Ensure horses are vaccinated before events and avoid unnecessary mixing.

Environmental management: Maintain well-ventilated and clean stables.

Education: Raise awareness about equine influenza, vaccination, and biosecurity practices. Promptly report suspected cases.

Consistently applying these measures can greatly reduce the risk of equine influenza and protect your horses' health. Regularly consult your vet for updates on vaccinations and emerging risks.

About the equine influenza vaccination

Vaccinating is the primary tool used to control equine influenza and plays a pivotal role in reducing the severity and spread.

The vaccine stimulates the horse's immune system to produce antibodies against specific strains of influenza virus. Vaccination protocols typically involve initial priming doses followed by regular boosters to maintain immunity. Timing and frequency of vaccination may vary based on factors such as competitive activities.

By reducing the risk of infection and mitigating disease severity, equine influenza vaccination helps safeguard individual horses and prevents outbreaks. It is a cornerstone of responsible horse care, recommended by vets and regulatory bodies to ensure the health and welfare of horses globally.

In the United Kingdom, the current equine influenza vaccination protocols vary depending on the equestrian discipline, It is always the responsibility of the owner to adhere to the rules of their governing body and ensure they are well within the limits to allow participation.

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This factsheet was created by the VetPartners Equine Team, with assistance from our Marketing Team and Veterinary Regulatory Advisors.

For further information, please contact your local VetPartners Equine Veterinary Practice on:

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Together with our practices, our focus is on providing an excellent service to our equine clients.

No two practices are the same, and we understand and embrace that independent spirit.