

RABIES

Rabies in horses is a rapidly progressive viral disease that invariably culminates in neurologic signs and death. Horses are usually exposed to rabies by the bite of a wild animal, such as a skunk, raccoon, or fox. Because horses are generally kept in areas where it is impossible to totally eliminate wildlife, the danger of rabies is always present.

Rabies can be transmitted from horses to humans. Considering this grave danger, rabies should always be considered in any horse with a rapidly progressive illness that includes neurologic signs. Because the signs of rabies can easily be confused with those of other problems, this disease is frequently misdiagnosed early in its development. Often, attempts to diagnose or treat the problem before an accurate diagnosis is made can lead to inadvertent exposure of handlers and other people. For instance, horses with rabies may appear to be choking, and someone may try to retrieve the suspected object in its throat, unwittingly exposing themselves to rabies.

Clinical Signs

Early signs of rabies in the horse include depression, anorexia, lameness, colic, or fever. Some horses show the more expected signs of aggression and excessive salivation, but this varies widely in individual horses. Horses show different clinical signs depending on where the virus localizes in the central nervous system. Once signs appear, most horses worsen rapidly and go down. Convulsions or coma may precede death.

Diagnosis

A definitive diagnosis of rabies is difficult to make before the horse dies, although laboratory tests are

available. Unfortunately, the results are often negative until late in the disease. After death, a conclusive diagnosis can be made from brain tissue.

Treatment

No treatment is available to halt the progress of rabies, and, once a positive diagnosis is made, the horse should be euthanized as soon as possible. Because diagnosis may take a relatively long time, nursing care must be provided until other diseases are ruled out. The risk of human exposure then becomes a real danger. The affected horse should be isolated, and not handled unnecessarily. Caretakers should be immunized against rabies and should take every precaution to avoid exposure, such as wearing gloves when handling the horse. Anyone who has had recent contact (within the last several weeks) with the horse should be notified and referred to a physician.

Prevention

Vaccination against rabies is the safest, easiest and surest protection against the disease. Reducing exposure to wildlife is recommended, but this may be difficult or impossible. If a vaccinated animal is suspected of being exposed to rabies (by wild-animal bite or contact with a known case), that animal's level of immunity can be checked by a laboratory test immediately after exposure.

Vaccinated animals with a known exposure to rabies should be revaccinated quickly and observed closely for at least three months. It is recommended that nonvaccinated animals with a known exposure be euthanized. If an owner decides to keep a nonvaccinated, exposed animal, vaccination is not recommended and the horse should be kept under observation for six months.

GET TO KNOW AN EQUINE VETERINARIAN

Equine veterinarians understand the special bond of affection that exists between you and your horse. It is the same bond of caring that led them to choose the field of equine medicine. The professional organization of these veterinarians is the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP), and a vital part of their mission is to improve the health and welfare of the horse.

An equine veterinarian offers the best professional care of your horse in the treatment of injury and disease. And, working closely with you, an equine veterinarian will provide a complete program of preventive care tailored to your horse, taking into account:

- the type and age of your horse
- the work, competition or pleasure activities of your horse
- the health history of your horse
- special disease threats in your area
- new diseases which may be emerging.

An equine veterinarian is your horse's best friend.

