

Designing A Spring Vaccination Program To Fit Your Horse's Needs

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Spring vaccination season is upon us. Let this article serve as a guide to help you decide which vaccines are necessary for your horses.

There are several diseases that all horses should be vaccinated against. These diseases are endemic— meaning your horse could be exposed anytime, anywhere. All of these diseases are painful to the horse and often are deadly. Thus for all horses “spring shots” should include the following annual vaccines:

Rabies— The rabies virus is introduced to the horse's system by the bite of an infected mammal (usually bats or skunks in Wisconsin). The virus then enters the nerve cells at the wound site and travels to the horse's brain. Early diagnosis of rabies in horses is very difficult as there can be a vast variety of symptoms. Rabies is always fatal and diagnosis is usually made post mortem. Many times an infected horse cannot eat or swallow. This is scary because handlers will often look in the horse's mouth exposing themselves to rabies.

Tetanus-- Clostridium tetani is an anaerobic bacteria found naturally in soil and fecal material. It can enter a horse's system via an open wound and causes “lock jaw”. Death rate for tetanus is 80%.

Sleeping Sickness-The two causes of sleeping sickness in our area are Eastern and Western Equine Encephalitis. These are both viruses and are carried by blood sucking insects. Infection causes fever, neurologic symptoms and often death. There has been an increased incidence of Eastern Equine Encephalitis in Wisconsin the last several summers. Make sure your horses get vaccinated annually one month prior to insect season.

West Nile Virus- Most horse owners are familiar with this new disease in horses which is transmitted thru mosquitoes. Contrary to information on internet sites and in lay publications this vaccine is very safe and effective for all horses, including breeding animals and pregnant mares. Have all horses vaccinated annually one month prior to mosquito season.

For horses that never leave the farm and are not exposed to any horses that travel, annual vaccination against Rabies, Tetanus, EEE, WEE and West Nile may be all that is necessary. However, for show horses, those living at boarding stables or those that travel for trail riding, rodeos, breeding purposes, etc. We must also include vaccination against three common respiratory diseases:

Influenza— The flu virus is highly contagious and is passed thru nasal secretions from an infected horse. Infection results in high fever, loss of appetite and often prolonged cough and loss of use. Young horses and those under stress (i.e. competition, trailering) are especially at risk. We recommend the intranasal flu vaccine be administered to all at risk horses every 6 months.

Equine Herpes Virus (Rhino)-Similar to the “common cold” in humans this virus causes upper respiratory infection that can last for a month, and occasionally abortions and neurologic disease. Although available, vaccines are not 100% effective against this virus, we strongly encourage that at risk horses be vaccinated every 3-6 months. Vaccination provides some protection and will lesson the severity and length of infection.

Strangles– Caused by a Strep bacteria this highly contagious disease is spread through nasal discharge. Infection results in swelling or drainage of lymph nodes, thick nasal discharge, and fever. Strangles infection can result in complications and has a long recovery period. We recommend annual administration of the intranasal vaccine which is very effective when given properly.

Broodmares and breeding stallions should be vaccinated for all the discussed diseases. We recommend vaccinating pregnant broodmares with their annual vaccines 4-6 weeks prior to anticipated foaling date. This will provide the foal with immunity for the first 5 months of life.

Note that the intramuscular form of the vaccine should be used in pregnant mares as it provides better immunity to the foal than does the intranasal form. Pregnant mares also require additional Rhino vaccines at 5, 7, and 9 months of gestation or every 3 months throughout the year.

Please contact your veterinarian if you have any questions about your vaccination program.