

Biosecurity of Horses at Race Meets

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Biosecurity helps protect your racehorse from contracting contagious diseases at a meet! To be successful, it requires flawless cooperation among all persons who contact horses, i.e. owners, trainers, grooms, drivers, jockeys, veterinarians, test barn staff, management, and even the casual fans who stroll through the stable area. To achieve this level of cooperation, each participant must understand the dire consequence of seemingly innocuous actions. Even the strictest vaccination program is quickly undone by sloppy stable practices that allow, for example, sharing of water buckets, bits and bridles, or nose-to-nose contact between horses, or even a well-wishing visitor patting the nose of every horse in the shed row.

The list of possible biosecurity breaches is far too long to list, and ultimate responsibility rests on those who control the medical care and immediate environment of the horse to exercise good common sense. They should work closely with their veterinarian to tailor a wellness program to fit the horse's individual needs. This encompasses feeding and husbandry practices, training and conditioning, and vaccinations, all provided at the farm, long before shipping to a race meet. And a good wellness program should include avoiding any congregation of horses at which a strong biosecurity plan is not imposed.

Management has the vitally important responsibility of promulgating a functional biosecurity plan to protect horses stabled at the track. First and foremost, every horse entering the grounds must be on a sound wellness program as evidenced by a health certificate. Exposure to a diseased horse that ships in defeats the protective measures implemented at the farm. And the only way to restrict entry of a sick horse is to require a Certificate of Veterinary Inspection (Health Certificates) prior to admission to the grounds. In addition to preserving the bio-integrity of the stable area, biosecurity also helps protect race management; failure to prevent a disease outbreak would likely force quarantine of the stables, cancellation of the meet, and catastrophic financial loss to racing participants, in addition to death, disease, and injury to affected horses.

Risks fluctuate for each disease, season and geographic location, and the fluid nature of the risks necessarily causes recommendations to change. In short, today's recommendation may not be valid for tomorrow, or may be excessive. For now, the contagious diseases of primary concern at race meets in Virginia include only Influenza, Equine Herpes Virus (EHV-1), and Strangles. However, with widespread travel of racehorses, Vesicular Stomatitis and Equine Viral Arteritis could spread from distant parts of the country with little warning. In many cases, diseases are transmitted long before obvious symptoms are recognized. In most cases, routine and frequent monitoring of a horse's body temperature is the only early sign of pending disease. And viruses may be shed for 14 days or longer after symptoms have resolved.

General Biosecurity Considerations:

Never take a horse to a meet if it has had a fever above 101.5 within 3 days or has shown any symptom of disease within 14 days. For this reason, Race Events should require Health Certificates on all horses entering the grounds, dated within 3 to 10 days at the point of origin of shipping; this single requirement helps protect most horses on the grounds from possible exposure, assuming all parties use due diligence in preparing the certificate. A sloppy health certificate is a waste of time and money.

Small and constant populations of racehorses may be safe with vaccinations for Equine Influenza and Equine Herpes Virus at six-month intervals. Large or highly mobile populations should be vaccinated at four-month intervals. Current data suggests vaccinating more frequently than 4 months may diminish the horse's immunity. Immunity takes at least 7 days to become effective after vaccination.

Vaccination for West Nile Virus should also be considered because the symptoms of WNV may confound diagnosis of the neurological form of Equine Herpes Virus.

Equine Infectious Anemia and Equine Piroplasmiasis, although rare, are catastrophic blood-borne diseases, spread naturally by insects. However in racing populations, un-hygienic practices by untrained and unscrupulous individuals have caused clusters of infection in several states. Therefore, have all medical needs for your horses performed by licensed professionals.