

FAQs About Equine Herpes Myeloencephalopathy (EHM)

What is EHM?

EHM is the neurologic form of equine herpesvirus-1 (EHV-1). EHV-1 has three forms: respiratory, which is the most common; abortive; and neurologic. Neurological forms of EHM occur when the virus affects the blood vessels of the brain and/or spinal cord.

How likely is my horse to contract EHM?

Fortunately, EHM is a relatively rare form of EHV-1. Not every horse that is newly exposed to, or carrying the latent form of, EHV-1 will develop EHM. EHV-1 may exist in the horse as a latent virus and coexist in the horse without ever manifesting signs of clinical illness. It is believed that stress, including stress from moving, extreme physical activity, illness or training, can “reawaken” the latent form of the virus in a horse. Horses may also contract EHV-1 (EHM) by coming into contact with a horse that is shedding the virus through respiratory secretions.

How does EHM spread?

The EHV-1 virus primarily spreads by contact with virus-infected respiratory secretions, either through horse-to-horse physical contact, or via people, clothing, equipment or stalls that have been in contact with the virus.

Are there certain types of horses more susceptible to EHM?

No, all breeds and ages of horses can contract EHM, although older horses may be more susceptible due to their aging immune status. Horses that are considered under heavy stress may also be more susceptible to EHM, due to the adverse effect that stress has on their immune system.

What are the clinical signs of EHM?

Early clinical signs may be difficult to detect, sometimes only manifesting as a fever of 102°F or higher. Often times, the fever may be biphasic (having two fever spikes). Other early clinical signs may include cough, reddened mucus membranes, puffy or red eyes, and swollen legs. As clinical signs of EHM progress, they may include incoordination, difficulty standing, difficulty urinating and defecating, ‘dog sitting’ and extreme lethargy.

What should I do if I notice any of these signs?

If you suspect your horse may be showing signs of EHM, contact your veterinarian immediately, and, if possible, isolate your horse from other horses. Your veterinarian will conduct an examination and a laboratory test that may enable him or her to rapidly be able to determine if your horse is shedding the EHV-1 virus.

How can I prevent my horse from getting EHM?

While there are no vaccines labeled for prevention of the neurological form of EHV, your veterinarian may recommend a vaccine protocol in an attempt to minimize the risk of disease. If there is an EHM, positive horse in your area,

protect your horse(s) by increasing your biosecurity practices. Ensure all people interacting with your horse have either not been in contact with an EHM horse or farm, or have properly changed their clothes/footwear and have thoroughly disinfected their hands and any equipment they bring onto your farm. Monitoring your horse's temperature twice daily is recommended.

If I suspect one of my horses may have been exposed to, or has tested positive for, EHM, how do I protect my other horses?

If a horse on your farm is positive for EHM, quarantine that horse and enlist the strictest biosecurity practices possible to prevent the spread of the virus to other horses. That includes isolating the EHM horse, and ensuring clothing, footwear and all equipment are properly disinfected after being near the sick horse. Potentially exposed horses should be closely monitored for clinical signs as well as fever. Discuss vaccination strategies with your veterinarian regarding horses that have not been exposed.

What changes should I make to how often I vaccinate or what types of vaccines my horse receives?

While there are no vaccines labeled for prevention of the neurological form of EHV, your veterinarian may recommend a vaccine protocol in an attempt to minimize the risk of disease. Work with your veterinarian to identify a vaccine protocol based on a risk analysis.

What kind of prognosis should I expect if my horse has EHM?

EHM is a relatively rare but frightening condition, and has a mortality rate as high as 40 percent.* Some of those deaths are caused by the virus itself; others are the result of humane euthanasia due to debilitating effects of the virus.

Many horses make a full recovery from EHM. During the recovery process, ensure that your horse has the required supportive care and is frequently monitored. Once recovered, a horse can lead a healthy, active life.

What are some best practices that I should enlist to keep my horse healthy?

Horse health involves a menu of actions to take to keep your horse performing at its optimum potential:

- Ensure adequate housing for each horse, including clean bedding, shelter from harsh weather and dust management.
- Minimize stress.
- Provide clean water and a nutritious diet daily.
- Allow plenty of time and space to exercise your horse daily.
- Work closely with your veterinarian to make sure vaccinations are timely and your horse is protected from disease.
- Above all, know your horse. While they may not speak your language, they communicate frequently with subtle behavior or performance changes.

*Source: https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/emergingissues/downloads/ehv1final.pdf