

Potomac Horse Fever (PHF): Frequently asked questions.

What are the signs of PHF?

Affected horses have a fever (over 101.5 F) and are dull and off feed. They may show profuse, projectile diarrhea. Severe cases may develop laminitis (founder).

How is it spread?

PHF is NOT spread from horse to horse. Most cases occur when horses eat insects or fluke larvae that carry the organism. The organism (called *Neorickettsia risticii*) infects horses by invading the gut. Some cases may occur if an infected fluke or insect penetrates the skin.

What puts horses at risk?

Proximity to snails, bats, and insects that live near water. Caddisflies, dragonflies and mayflies are known hosts. Proximity to creeks, rivers and other freshwater sources. Excessive rainfall that promotes insect breeding may increase disease frequency in a given year.

How is PHF diagnosed and treated?

Blood and manure samples are sent to Cornell for diagnosis; it takes a few days to get results. Sick horses must receive treatment ASAP so therapy is started as soon as PHF is suspected. Treatment, which involves antibiotics, intravenous fluids and other supportive measures is intense and expensive.

What about the vaccine?

A vaccine labeled for PHF has been available for about 30 years. However, unlike vaccines for rabies or tetanus that are very effective in preventing disease, PHF vaccine has not been shown to effectively prevent the disease. Some clinicians who have treated large numbers of cases feel that the clinical signs were less severe in the vaccinated horses, however.

So, should I vaccinate MY horse?

PHF is a very severe disease that can end in death or debilitating founder. While the vaccine will not completely protect your horse from getting the disease, it *may* help a horse fight the organism if exposure occurs. As one medicine clinician from Cornell said: "*It's all we have*". Horses who live near freshwater sources are the population most at risk.

When should the vaccine be given?

The first time the vaccine is given it must be boosted in 3-4 weeks. After that, our medicine colleagues at Cornell advise that the vaccine be given in the spring and then boosted again mid-summer to match the peak in cases that occurs late summer and early fall.

My horse received a two dose series of the vaccine several years ago but has not had it in a few years. If I choose to vaccinate now, is a booster dose needed?

No. As noted above, if a dose is given this fall, the horse should be revaccinated next spring. A mid-summer dose would increase the potency for the entire transmission season. But please remember, the vaccine is considered an aid in reducing the severity of disease, not a biologic that will prevent disease. And no research exists that firmly documents the efficacy of the product in reducing symptoms.

What else can I do?

Be alert for a horse that is not acting right, off feed or showing diarrhea. Take a temperature. A fever is defined as a temperature above 101.5 degrees F. Call for a veterinary visit promptly if these signs occur. Minimizing insect ingestion in stabled horses by turning off barn lights at night, which normally attract the insects, is also a good idea.

Do people or pets get PHF?

No.