

Self-care during a strangles outbreak

Tips to
help you cope
if disease
strikes

Strangles outbreaks can be stressful, physically tiring and emotionally draining for horse owners and yard managers. It is important that we look after ourselves as well as our horses when the disease strikes.

Strangles does not discriminate - it can affect anyone. Even with a systematic screening protocol in place, Redwings suffered its own outbreak in 2015. It took a lot of dedication and teamwork to quickly and effectively contain the disease, but that's not to say we got everything right, and we definitely learnt lessons along the way that have helped us better protect our residents. It also taught us how challenging an outbreak can be, so we wanted to share some tips to help you stay positive and healthy while working to clear infection from your yard.



Coping with an outbreak

- Remember that strangles is no-one's fault. It can be a learning curve, but blame is not helpful, including blaming yourself.
- Seek and follow your vet's advice. Whatever opinions and suggestions are offered by others, you're paying your vet for their expertise so make the most of it.
- Don't be afraid to ask your vet or other experienced professionals lots of questions, ask them to explain something more fully or go over something again whenever you need.
- Remember that outbreaks are hard work and stressful for vets too, even though their training may mean they hide it well.
- Being open and honest about an outbreak is expected and most people will respond with warmth and support.
- Keep an open line of contact with people so everyone feels informed and up to date on what can be a changing situation.
- Try to stay resilient and not be swayed by other people's suggestions or input unless they have validity. It is easy to make decisions based on pleasing or pacifying others when it may not be the best decision overall.
- Avoid dwelling on criticism from others. Stay focused on what is within your control and remember people can react hurtfully when they are worried, but their reaction is their responsibility, not yours.
- Encourage other people to come to you directly if they have any questions, comments or concerns about the situation.

Whilst communicating openly about an outbreak is a good thing, try to avoid being drawn into unhelpful conversations online. Social media can be a useful way to communicate, but try not to let it become a source of anxiety. Sometimes people decide to say that they will be focusing on caring for their horse and not posting again until the outbreak has been cleared. Alternatively, turning off comments on your posts will prevent negative responses.



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Diffusing tension

Tensions may rise at the site of an outbreak. This may be for a number of reasons, perhaps linked to the cause of the outbreak, or a disagreement over the way it is being handled.

If tensions arise with other people on a yard, consider ways of smoothing things if possible:

- Ask for a quiet chat with the person somewhere you won't be interrupted.
 - Avoid emotional language and try and listen to the other person with an open mind.
 - Concentrate on the current situation and the way forward, try not to dwell on past actions or behaviour that cannot be changed.
 - Accept that another person may be struggling in different ways or have different views to yours.
 - Focus on areas of common ground, such as the frustrations of going through an outbreak, being worried about horse health and wanting to clear the infection as soon as possible.
 - Regular yard meetings can be helpful during an outbreak, especially when a vet is visiting and can spend some time listening to and answering questions.
 - It is important to confirm that whilst you'll take people's comments on board, you are following the advice and recommendations of professionals in the best interests of all.
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Looking after yourself

- Try and remember that you are not alone. Thousands of owners have cared for a horse with strangles at some time. There are Facebook groups where you can connect with other people who understand what it's like to go through an outbreak.
- Stay close to friends and family who can help and support you, be honest with them when you're struggling or need to let off steam. People don't have to know about horses to empathise with someone who is tired, frustrated or worried.
- It can be easy to skip meals or drink more alcohol than usual but you need to be fed and watered as well as your horse. Avoid judging yourself harshly if standards slip a little during a difficult time.
- Try and get enough sleep. Did you know that we sleep better if we haven't been spending time on computers or mobile phones for at least an hour before bed?
- If you're prone to waking and worrying in the middle of the night, try keeping a notebook by your bed to write down thoughts or reminders to help clear your mind and allow you to drop off. If that doesn't help, get up and do something distracting (ironing is good!) for 20 minutes before returning to bed.
- Try a simple breathing exercise by inhaling while counting slowly to 4, holding for 2 and exhaling for 8. Repeat until you feel calmer.
- Give yourself permission to do things that relax you, whether that's baking, watching a film, yoga or a long hot bath.
- Is it possible to create some space in other areas of your life? Could you get your food shop delivered, ask a friend to help with the school run or childcare, or postpone a routine appointment?
- Let yourself look forward to when the outbreak is over. Plan a day out, some time with family or friends or just raise a glass to yourself for having done your best and come out the other side.



If you feel yourself struggling it is important to speak to someone even if it is just to air your thoughts or clear your head. There are several organisations offering free mental health support, including Riders Minds which provides online resources and a 24/7 helpline specifically for equestrians. Go to <https://ridersminds.org/> or ring 0300 102 1540. You can also speak to your GP about how they may be able to help you through a difficult time.

