

Strangles (streptococcus equi)

What's strangles and what are the signs?

Strangles is a bacterial infection affecting a horse's respiratory system. Early signs are usually fever, dullness and loss of appetite; followed by nasal discharge, swollen glands and abscesses around the head. Fever generally develops before a horse becomes infectious.

It can take up to 21 days for a horse to show symptoms. Some horses only develop mild signs of disease, but are still infectious. Although strangles is not often fatal, it can cause serious suffering to the horse and heartache for owners and businesses affected by an outbreak.

Some horses become strangles carriers if they are not checked by a vet shortly after infection, and treated if necessary. Carriers appear healthy but can shed bacteria at any time. Strangles can be stopped in its tracks if we use routine testing and hygiene procedures. The good news is this is becoming more common across the industry.

How does strangles spread?

Strangles is not airborne, but can spread fast. Horses may become ill after contact with an infected horse, or indirect contact with contaminated surfaces, equipment, tack, water tanks, or human hands, clothes and shoes.

Strangles can survive in the environment, but its longevity depends on factors such as temperature and moisture. Bacteria have been found in water tanks 30 days after being contaminated, whereas it can be killed in as little as two days by direct sunlight.

What do I do if I think strangles may be on one of my yards?

Notify your client straight away if you have concerns about infectious disease and advise them to contact their vet.

Remember healthy-looking horses on the yard may also be infectious, so take precautions to protect yourself and your other clients. If you are on site, thoroughly disinfect any equipment you have used there with a product that is known to kill strangles (eg: Safe-4, Virkon, Steri-7). Change outer clothing, disinfect boots and thoroughly wash and disinfect hands. If possible, disinfect vehicle tyres.

You may prefer to postpone routine visits to a yard with strangles, or schedule a visit at the end of the day to allow for thorough disinfection before setting out again the next day.

Preventing strangles

There are no guarantees, but good biosecurity can drastically reduce the risk to horses and yards.

- Encourage yards to screen new horses for strangles. Ideally a horse should spend three weeks in quarantine on arrival and be tested to ensure they are not a strangles carrier.
- Use and promote good hygiene practices such as handwashing between handling different horses, then disinfecting equipment and disinfecting or changing clothes and boots between yards.
- Everyone should be alert to signs of disease and act as soon as it is suspected. If it looks like strangles, assume it is until you know otherwise! Regular temperature checking means infection can be spotted and contained before it spreads.
- Promote respect around strangles. An outbreak can happen to anyone and being honest and kind helps everyone work together to contain the disease.
- Keep up to date with what's happening in your area. The Surveillance of Equine Strangles project posts updates on confirmed diagnoses of the disease at: www.aht.org.uk/disease-surveillance/surveillance-equine-strangles



Photo: courtesy of Robert Rush, AWCF

For more information

Redwings Stamp Out Strangles Hub & Pledge: www.redwings.org.uk/strangles

Equine Biosecurity Aware



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