



Horse Health:

Equine Influenza

What is it?

Equine influenza (EI) is one of the most common and contagious respiratory diseases affecting horses worldwide. Whether your horse is a seasoned competitor or a retired companion, understanding this illness is key to keeping them healthy and safe.

Equine influenza is a **highly infectious viral respiratory disease** that affects horses, ponies, donkeys, and other equids. It spreads rapidly and can cause significant disruption to training, competition schedules, and overall horse welfare. Symptoms can appear within 1 to 5 days of exposure, and recovery may take weeks, especially in active horses.

What causes it?

Equine influenza is caused by **influenza A viruses**, specifically strains adapted to equine species. Like human flu viruses, these can mutate over time, which makes controlling outbreaks challenging. The virus spreads primarily through aerosol droplets when infected horses cough, but it can also be transmitted via contaminated surfaces, equipment, and clothing.

What horses are at risk?

All horses are potentially at risk, but some are more vulnerable than others:

- **Young horses** with immature immune systems
- **Older horses** or those with pre - existing respiratory conditions
- **Unvaccinated horses**

- Horses that **travel, compete, or mix with others** at events or yards

Even horses that **never leave the property** can be exposed if other horses or people on the yard come into contact with the virus elsewhere. The virus can travel through the air and be carried on clothing or tack, making **complete isolation difficult**.

What are the symptoms?

Typical signs of equine influenza include:

- **High fever** (often above 38.5°C)
- **Dry, hacking cough**
- **Nasal discharge**
- **Lethargy**
- **Loss of appetite**

Some horses may also develop secondary complications such as **pneumonia** or **swelling in the lower limbs**, especially if they are very young, elderly, or immunocompromised. Symptoms can last **3 to 6 weeks**, and horses often need **extended rest** - typically one week for every day of illness - to avoid long - term damage to the heart or lungs.

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis is usually based on **clinical signs** and **history of exposure**, but your vet may recommend:

- **Nasal swabs** for virus detection
- **Blood tests** to assess immune response

Prompt diagnosis is important to manage the disease and prevent its spread to other horses.

How can it be treated or managed?

There is **no specific antiviral treatment** for equine influenza.

Management focuses on **supportive care**:

- **Rest** is crucial - avoid exercise until fully recovered
- **Anti-inflammatory medications** may be prescribed to reduce fever and discomfort
- **Isolation** of infected horses to prevent transmission
- **Good hygiene** practices, including disinfecting equipment and limiting contact

In severe cases, especially with complications like pneumonia, **hospitalization** and more intensive care may be needed.

Can it be prevented?

Yes - **vaccination is the most effective way** to reduce the risk of equine influenza.

- Vaccinated horses are less likely to develop severe symptoms
- Vaccination helps achieve herd immunity, protecting vulnerable horses
- Many competition venues and yards require vaccination
- Even retired or home - based horses can benefit, as the virus can be carried in by others

Following a major outbreak in 2019, most vets now recommend booster vaccinations every **six months** for horses in high-risk environments. However, schedules may vary depending on your horse's lifestyle and the rules of specific disciplines or venues. Always consult your vet to tailor the vaccination plan to your horse's needs.

Most horses tolerate the vaccine well. Mild side effects may include:

- Muscle stiffness or swelling at the injection site
- Lethargy
- Low-grade fever

Serious reactions are **rare**, and your vet can help schedule vaccinations to minimize disruption.

If you're unsure about your horse's risk level or vaccination status, speak to your vet. They can provide personalized advice and help you make the best decision for your horse's wellbeing.