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How to Prevent and Detect Illness: Horse Show Edition By Carolyn Oppenheimer, DVM

Horse shows are akin to kindergarten when it comes to disease transmission. In a stressful environment with many horses from many different places, it is possible and maybe even probable that there will be some transmission of illness. There are simple precautions that can be taken beforehand, while at the show, and once the horses are home that can help prevent disease transmission and detect the first signs of illness.

This may go without saying, but do not travel with horses to areas of disease outbreaks. Also, before taking your horse off the property, consult with your veterinarian about the best vaccination and deworming protocol for your horse. Just like there are required vaccines for children before entering school, horses should be vaccinated for their protection and for the safety of other horses. Even though vaccines are not 100% effective, they significantly reduce the risk of contracting those diseases they protect against.

Each horse should ideally have his heart rate, respiratory rate, and rectal temperature taken before going to the show, twice a day while at the show, and twice a day for the week following. Minimally, rectal temperatures should be monitored daily. Some horses will continue to eat, drink and behave normally while having a fever so you can't just rely on a change in behavior to indicate that you should check your horse's temperature. Since a fever is often one of the first indications that the horse is ill, it is ideal to check twice daily.

Communal water troughs are a big no-no for horses at shows away from home. There is no better place for disease causing bugs to lie in wait than a water trough. Always bring water buckets from home and if possible haul water from home as well. Not only is this better from a biosecurity standpoint, but it may also allow finicky horses to feel more at home and keep hydrated. If using hoses from the grounds, don't let the nozzle rest in the water bucket as it could be contaminated with manure.

Ensure that the stalls are clean before allowing your horse to enter. Clean any manure or urine out and dispose of it in a designated area. Look and make sure the walls are clean of manure as well. Some pathogens (disease causing agents like parasites, bacteria, and viruses) are shed in the feces of sick and healthy horses so contact with other horses' manure should be limited as much as possible.

Once the horses are settled in their stalls, make sure there is a stall card identifying each horse with applicable information (horse's name, normal vital signs, owner's name/number, veterinarian name/number). Horses should also have identification on his or her halter.

It is important to monitor horses carefully once they return home from being off the property. In an ideal world, those horses that were at the show would be quarantined for 2 weeks before returning to the herd. Usually this is not possible. Therefore, it is imperative to wash hands between horses, to dispose of manure in a location where other horses do not have access to it (this should be done anyway), and to monitor their behavior and temperature once home. If these precautions are taken, horses are less likely to become ill, and if they do, it is much more likely to be noticed immediately with proper monitoring.

The basic overlying principles of all of these recommendations are to decrease exposure to unfamiliar horses, their water, and their manure. In addition, vaccination prevents contracting certain diseases. It is important to be prepared, but even the most careful horse owner can, and probably will, have a sick horse at some time or another. Just like in humans, some pathogens may be aerosolized and even indirect contact with shared equipment can transmit disease. Monitoring will allow the first signs of illness to be detected. With all of these practices in your arsenal, you can feel confident that you are prepared to prevent disease if possible or detect it early on.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.

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