

West Nile Disease in Equines

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When you think about horses, what do you think of? Perhaps you think of a fellow childhood collaborator—one who would tolerantly take you on long bareback rides while you dreamed of being a cowboy or cowgirl. Perhaps you think of a partner—the horse you use to help you out on the ranch, or to ride in a show, or maybe to teach others to ride. No doubt about it, the horse is perhaps the best and most useful friend and helper a man or woman of these times can have.

But now there is an alarming disease that has begun killing these creatures, threatening to destroy them even by the thousands. No, this terrible sickness isn't tetanus, rabies, or shipping fever, which are familiar if dreaded diseases in equines. It is the West Nile Disease, a disease that has only recently made its troublesome appearance in the United States—and it's killed an unsettling number of horses. "Last year, there were more than thirty reported equine cases in Oklahoma alone, and more than thirteen hundred cases in the U.S." This disease has plagued agriculturists and equine owners in our nation since 1999. "It is best estimated that the disease causes up to a 38% fatality rate in horses." That means that last year, hundreds of horses that could have been saved by a simple, often inexpensive injection are now dead. In addition to the horses already killed by this dangerous sickness, many more cases are expected,

regardless of the vaccine that has been developed to prevent this devastating disease in equines.

The West Nile Virus is transmitted to horses through contact with infected mosquitoes, which in part explains why it has spread so quickly: mosquitoes feed on blood from an infected bird once, and throughout the remainder of its lifespan, that mosquito can transmit West Nile virus to every horse it feeds on. A horse cannot transmit the disease to another horse, or to a human; horses are a “dead end species,” seeing as the virus is blood-borne—West Nile virus must be transmitted through blood to infect a new animal or human. Mosquitoes and some other parasitic insects are the most common carriers of this disease—however, it has also been found that the West Nile Virus can be spread by blood transfusions. The disease, when manifested in horses, is typically accompanied by weakness of limbs, clumsiness, trembling, fever, and eventually death. There is a vaccine that provides a certain amount of protection from this disease for equines, but since not all horse owners buy and use this product, chances are good that this often-fatal infection will continue to be a growing concern in the years to come. The West Nile virus can also be transmitted to humans through the same mosquitoes that infect horses, and has been deemed a significant danger to the health of our nation’s citizens.

The Equine West Nile Disease was first noted in the early 1960’s in Egypt, hence the name. The first appearance of West Nile virus in North America, taking place in 1999, and its subsequent spread further throughout the United States are important and unfortunate landmarks in the evolving history of our nation. It has spread widely since those early dates, sprawling across countries and continents,

infecting and often killing many who come in contact with it. To this date, only one of the forty-eight continental states has not yet had a human, avian, or equine case of West Nile Disease, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. This disease can be dangerous when humans, as well as equines, become involved: the countless horses infected last year pales in comparison to the human lives at stake. It is hypothesized that by this summer, many cities that have not yet had an equine case will be counted among those that have already had so many casualties resulting from this aggressive and volatile virus.

The disease has continued to move west and north in our country during the latter months, infecting many humans, birds, and horses in almost all of the continental states. The illness has spread widely, surprising many officials who had predicted that the West Nile virus would fail to move any further throughout the United States.

“If the danger is so great, then what are we doing about it?” you may ask. Well, spraying pesticides to kill possible disease-carrying mosquitoes is one effort that is underway to help eradicate this epidemic. Another is the afore-mentioned vaccine, which unfortunately has only been developed for horses as of yet; humans are still at high risk to the disease, with no vaccine created yet for us. You yourself can decrease the chances of your own animals being exposed by decreasing their exposure to mosquitoes. The best way to do this is by removing any potential sources of water in which mosquitoes can breed and reproduce; for example, containers or old tires left outside gather rainwater easily, which mosquitoes use as a place to breed. It is also thought that inoculated animals or those that have been infected with and survived West Nile may be immune for

life to the disease. Other than the mentioned preventative measures, there is little else taking place to stop this disease before it becomes a full-blown, worldwide pandemic—which, unfortunately, may take place much sooner than many might think.

This disease is a fatal threat to our equine stock, to our beloved childhood friends and to our co-workers of today. Although there are preventative measures that are available to provide protection from this disease, many people have decided to take their chances without it—some may not be able to afford it, some may not know about it, or it may not be readily available in some locations. But in any of these cases, the bottom line is: many more horses are going to die very soon if nothing is done to prevent this volatile disease from spreading further. Unfortunately, any horse without protection, regardless of what state it resides in, is at risk to this potentially fatal disease. Our country is acting admirably in the effort to eradicate this particular disease in the United States; however, there is only so much they can do. Only we, as members of our nation-wide community, as agriculturists, and as owners of equine stock, can look to the future and do whatever we can to stop this dangerous epidemic.

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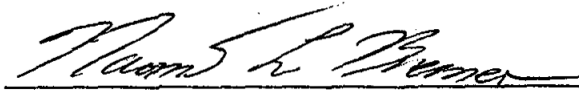
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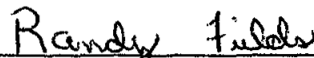
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