

What Texas Horse Owners Need to Know About Equine Piroplasmosis

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What is Equine Piroplasmosis?

- Equine piroplasmosis (EP) is a tick-borne disease resulting from infection of horses, mules, donkeys and zebras by the protozoal blood parasites *Babesia caballi* or *Theileria equi*. Infections with either of these organisms can cause numerous nonspecific clinical signs including weakness, incoordination, fever, loss of appetite, colic, poor exercise tolerance, anemia, jaundice (yellowing) of mucous membranes, swollen abdomen, labored breathing, dark red or dark yellow-colored urine, tearing and swelling of the eye lids, and maybe death.
- The incubation period of the disease is 7-21 days. Clinical signs last 8-12 days and horses may die within 24-48 hours after the first signs of disease. Mild cases are sometimes difficult to diagnose and horses may remain carriers of the disease for as long as 4 years or for life in the case of *T. Equi*.
- Transmission of the disease is primarily by ticks.
- Unsanitary practices such as use of dirty needles, surgical equipment, and blood transfusion also can transmit the disease between horses.
- The disease can be transmitted across the placenta from mare to unborn foal.

Why is EP Important?

- EP affects large numbers of equine species in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Central and South America, the Caribbean and Europe.
- In 1988, the U.S. was declared free of EP. It is considered a foreign animal disease and must be reported to state and federal animal health officials. Positive cases in the U.S. were reported in Florida (2008), Missouri (2009) and most recently in several counties in Texas and other states (2009-2010).
- Since the 2010 outbreak in south Texas, numerous states have imposed import restrictions on horses from Texas. Horse owners need to be familiar with the clinical signs of this disease and be aware that diagnostic testing may be required before interstate movement. Anyone hauling horses out of state should plan ahead and allow adequate time prior to transport, for sample processing and paperwork filing.

Are There Vaccinations or Diagnostic Tests for this Disease?

- There are currently no vaccinations available for EP prevention.
- The only method of protecting the horse population from the disease is by using recommended management

practices (outlined below) and by testing of at-risk horses.

- Testing is accomplished by submitting blood samples to approved/certified laboratories for cELISA tests. Nationally, there are nine approved laboratories for EP testing. The Texas Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratories in College Station and in Amarillo are the only approved laboratories in Texas. Serological testing procedures are available for *B. caballi* and *T. equi*. The National Veterinary Services Laboratory is the only laboratory approved for testing animals with clinical signs of disease and for purposes of export out of the U.S.

Are There Travel Restrictions for Transporting my Horses to Events, Races or Breeding Farms?

- Horses originating from quarantined premises in Texas are restricted from being moved off the premises.
- Non-quarantined horses are free to move within the state of Texas. However, certain events and facilities such as race tracks may impose restrictions on horses from affected areas and may require veterinary inspection and a negative EP test, scratching for ticks and/or application of an approved insecticide.
- The Texas Animal Health Commission requires permanent identification, of infected horses.
- A number of states have placed restrictions on horses from Texas and their requirements for testing and documentation vary. Horse owners who are transporting horses from Texas should contact their local

veterinarian or animal health officials for specific requirements for entering other states.

- Most states are currently only requiring a veterinary statement of inspection and documentation that horses did not originate from specific counties in Texas. However, some states are requiring EP testing within the last 30 days, for entry.

What Can Horse Owners do to Reduce the Risk of Horses Getting EP?

1. The most important management practice is avoiding contact with disease carrying ticks. Practice good insect (tick) control on premises. Avoid co-mingling horses with other horses of unknown origin or extended housing of horses in areas known to have reported high incidences of the disease. Inspect horses daily for ticks. If ticks are present, remove and spray horses with an approved synthetic pyrethroid product.
2. Only use test negative horses as blood donors.
3. Use a new, sterile needle and syringe for all injections. Clean and thoroughly disinfect all dental, tattoo and surgical equipment used on horses.
4. Contact your veterinarian if your horse is sick and exhibiting signs of fever, reduced feed intake or lethargy.

References

USDA, APHIS, Veterinary Services, National Animal Health Programs, www.aphis.usda.gov/animal.
Texas Animal Health Commission, www.tahc.state.tx.us/.
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