



Reasons To Vaccinate Your Horse

Is your horse up to date with their vaccinations? Nicola Kinnard-Comedie explains why vaccinations aren't just for competition horses.

Want a healthy horse? Horse owners spend an absolute fortune on keeping their horses well and healthy, from hoof, dental and worming care right through to magnetic rugs and boots; and let's not forget the complex selection of costly supplements that many horses receive.

However there are many owners who don't vaccinate their horses, which is an essential part of preventative health care. I am often struck by the number of owners at our Horse First Aid Courses who don't vaccinate their horses. So why is this?

Personally I think it is down to some owners not understanding the reasons to vaccinate, and some extrapolating from the small animal world where there has been much written about dogs being over vaccinated. It goes without saying that there are a few differences between horses and dogs, and this is not a straightforward comparison. So with that in mind here are eight compelling reasons to vaccinate your horse.

1. You are providing protection from life threatening diseases.

This is probably a fairly obvious reason, but by vaccinating your horse you are trying to keep it healthy. Horses in the UK

are routinely vaccinated against Equine Flu and Tetanus, and after an initial vaccination course receive an annual booster each year. At the time of writing this article (February 2019) there have been numerous reported cases of equine flu, and with the cancellation of racing and many equine events it is sensible to have your horse vaccinated for Flu as well as Tetanus. Tetanus is often overlooked by horse owners, but the consequences can be far more serious.

If your horse contracts Equine Flu they will be quite unwell, and a small number of cases are fatal. Tetanus however is a different matter, and in many ways is a much more serious disease as very few horses recover from this condition. Tetanus is a life threatening disease caused by a toxin released from a bacteria called *Clostridium tetani*. This bacteria lives in the environment, and infection from Tetanus occurs when the bacteria enters the body, generally

via a small wound. Tetanus affects all domestic animals (and humans), but the horse is the most susceptible species. Horses are also very prone to wounds, and spend a lot of time in a muddy environment. Prognosis is very poor, and sadly most cases don't survive. It is a horrible condition with the horse experiencing painful muscle tremors and spasms, sensitivity to light, inability to move, and failure of their respiratory system. Most cases of Tetanus are euthanised to prevent any further suffering to the horse. Tetanus is not an infectious disease, so it is not passed from horse to horse, and there really is no reason not to vaccinate a horse for it.

2. Vaccinating your horse is unlikely to make it unwell.

Often owners are concerned that a vaccination might make their horse unwell, but this is pretty uncommon. Just like a human receiving a flu

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vaccination your horse might experience some localised muscle soreness, and it is sensible to tailor your horse's work schedule around the vaccination giving them a few quieter days afterwards.

Some horses can develop an abscess in the injection site, although this isn't that common. If you are concerned speak to your vet as they can administer the vaccination into the pectoral muscles in the chest; this means that if an abscess did form, it will drain much better and heal faster. If your horse does have a reaction, which is very rare, do let your vet know so they can report this to the vaccination manufacturers.

3. Any age of horse can benefit from a vaccination.

Vaccinations are often thought to only be important for horses in work, and many owners simply vaccinate to comply with competition rules. Consequently, younger or older animals often get missed when it comes to an annual booster. A Tetanus vaccination is absolutely essential for all horses, whether they are competing at the highest level, very young, or long retired. As outlined, Tetanus is not passed from horse to horse and horses live in the ideal environment for this bacteria to pose a risk.

There are also very strong reasons to vaccinate your horse for Flu, even if they never leave the field. It is important to evaluate the risks of infectious diseases, such as Flu, for your own individual horse; consider how much 'horse traffic' there is in your yard. Do you have new horses arriving? Do lots of horses attend competitions and training days? Which horses does your horse interact with? Very few horses have no contact at all with 'unknown' horses, even if this is indirect.

With an older horse, think about any other health conditions they might suffer from, which could affect their immunity. For instance a horse with Cushings Disease is likely to have a reduced immune system, so would find it harder to fight off a virus such as Flu. If you are considering vaccination only for Tetanus it is advisable to discuss this decision with your vet, who can help you



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evaluate the risk of Flu for your individual horse. It should also be highlighted that a younger horse may also have reduced immunity, so rather than being forgotten with regard to vaccinations they could actually benefit more from the protection that a vaccination would offer. Antibodies are produced in response to a vaccination, making it easier for a horse to fight off the disease if they come into contact with it at a later date.

4. Vaccinations are a good financial investment.

Cost is often cited as a reason that owners don't vaccinate their horses, and I always find this surprising when the same owner would probably spend twice that amount on a new 'wonder supplement' or yet more 'matchy matchy' outfits. An annual booster for a combined Flu and Tetanus vaccination probably costs around the same as a lesson, but the financial outlay for not vaccinating could be much higher.

Compare the price of a booster vaccination to the cost of an Influenza outbreak, involving numerous visits from the vet, the horse being isolated for several weeks (if not longer), and many other associated costs with nursing. Likewise with Tetanus the vaccination may cost as little as £20 a year, compared to thousands of pounds of veterinary fees and the strong chance that the horse would not survive.

There are significant financial

TETANUS: CASE STUDY

by Samantha Mendoza, DVM.

"In the Philippines, tetanus and equine influenza A vaccines are a must for horses. However, these are not readily available in the provinces. That, coupled with equine vets being few and far between, makes it difficult for the horses to get these vaccines. In 2006, my horse, Gen, got colic. At the time, there were no equine vets where he was. I had called an equine vet and he talked to a cattle vet and small animal vet who I'd dragged out to see my horse. They ended up doing surgery outside, in the dark with car headlights as their only source of light. It wasn't the most ideal setting and was quite dirty. Surgery went okay and he was transferred to a university hospital. He had no prior vaccination for tetanus, so we had given him several doses of anti-tetanus serum, finishing practically all the stocks that we could find. Unfortunately, he succumbed to tetanus about a week after the surgery, showing signs of stiffness, lockjaw, protrusion of his third eyelid, and a sawhorse stance. He got worse as the days went by, so we had decided to put him to sleep to stop his suffering. Since then, we have vaccinated our horses regularly for tetanus and try to get others to do the same. To this day we get tetanus cases all the time, though we try to do vaccination drives for the horses in the provinces when we can."



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implications with an outbreak of Equine Flu in a yard. The centre will be ‘closed down’ with no hacking or competing for several weeks or even months; there are also the costs of running isolation areas, frequent vet visits, and potential loss of business as well.

The cost of treating Tetanus will easily run into thousands of pounds as it is managed with intensive nursing, and sadly the prognosis is very limited. Of all the vets that I work with only a few have had a successful outcome when treating a Tetanus case, and most horses are euthanised.

In order to make vaccinations affordable, and to improve uptake, many practices offer a practice plan where owners pay for vaccinations (and other routine care) on a monthly basis. Other practices offer a no-visit fee on set days, again making vaccinations very reasonable with a little bit of forward planning. Combining a call out fee with other owners is another way to make vaccinating very reasonable priced.

5. Vaccinating improves the health of the overall equine population.

One of the main reasons to vaccinate your horse is to protect your own animal from disease, but vaccinating your horse also contributes to the overall health of the entire equine population. Without lots of responsible owners vaccinating

their horses we would probably see far more outbreaks of Flu.

6. You can't compete without vaccinations.

Your horse will need to be vaccinated if you wish to compete in Riding Club and Pony Club competitions, as well as in affiliated disciplines. An up to date Flu vaccination is also required at many local shows, so it is worth looking at the rules of entry. Checking vaccination records has become much more common, and it would be a shame to arrive at a show or championship to find that you couldn't compete because your horse's vaccinations had lapsed.

7. Up to date vaccinations are essential for your insurance policy.

Vaccinating your horse is considered part of routine health care, like hoof trimming or shoeing, dental care and worming. If an owner chooses not to vaccinate their horse, or the vaccinations have lapsed, the Insurance policy will not cover costs associated with any condition that could have been prevented with a vaccination. This would mean these costs would need to be covered by the owner and as previously outlined this can be very expensive.

8. Immunity provided by vaccinations doesn't last forever. Booster vaccinations

are still needed.

Many owners assume that once their horse has received annual booster vaccinations for a number of years that they have sufficient immunity for life. Whilst your horse is not going to lose all benefits of the last booster vaccination once exactly 365 days have passed, there is no evidence that protection can last longer than current vaccination guidelines dictate.

Research shows that antibodies produced in response to a Flu (or a combined) vaccination start to decline after six months, but adequate cover is still offered for most leisure horses up to twelve months, hence an annual booster vaccination. This decline in antibodies after six months is the reason that horses competing under FEI rules are required to have a booster twice a year, and why during a Flu outbreak many owners choose to give an additional booster at six months.

With Tetanus vaccinations, owners are often surprised that horses need to be given annual (if combined with Flu), or biannual vaccination (Tetanus only) because people receive boosters quite infrequently. A human may receive a Tetanus booster every ten years depending on risks for that individual. As highlighted there is a danger of extrapolating from other species, and we shouldn't forget that horses are very susceptible to Tetanus, live in the perfect environment for Tetanus bacteria, and are prone to cutting themselves.

Conclusion

I hope that this article has been useful for you, and dispels some of the myths around vaccinating horses. If you would like to learn more about keeping your horse healthy and happy then why not consider joining our online Horse First Aid Course, where you will learn all you need to about colic, infectious diseases, wound care, eye conditions and much more. 🐾

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