

Equine Herpes Virus type 1 (EHV1)

EHV1 is the most serious viral cause of abortion in horses in Australia.

The horse owner's responsibility

It is a List B notifiable disease in Tasmania. This means that the disease is known to occur here from time to time and there is no contingency plan to eradicate it from the State. However, anyone seeing signs of it in their horses must report it to animal health authorities and must take steps to manage it. Your vet may report the event on your behalf. EHV1 is reportable because countries that import horses from Australia demand Government certification that the horses do not come from a property where EHV1 abortion has occurred.

Clinical signs

With EHV1, abortion typically occurs without any warning. The mare rarely shows any signs beforehand. The first, and in most cases the only, sign of EHV1 is an aborted foetus. ***As a matter of normal husbandry, mare owners should always regard any aborted foetus as a suspect case of EHV1 and should always have it examined by their vet.***

With EHV1, most abortions occur late in the pregnancy, but can be as early as 4 months.

In some cases, an infected horse may be ataxic (ie unsteady as it walks), have a wide-based stance and urinate frequently. These neurological signs have been observed prior to an abortion outbreak in some cases.

Overseas, some infected horses have shown breathing difficulties, but this sign has not been associated with EHV1 in Australia.

What causes EHV1

EHV1 is due to a particular strain of herpes virus. A horse that has had EHV1 will have a latent infection for the rest of its life. The virus remains dormant until the horse experiences stress that is sufficient to reactivate the virus.

There are two ways that EHV-1 can occur on a property

- a resident animal reactivates a previously latent infection
- EHV1 is introduced with visiting horses or infected fomites (ie horse gear, clothing, bedding etc)

Latent EHV1 infection is common in Australia's horse population. The EHV1 factor that you can best manage on your property is stress in pregnant mares.

Formal quarantining of an infected property is not necessary in most cases

Even if your property is affected, there are strategies you can use to minimise disruption to breeding enterprises. Your vet will advise you for your particular situation.

Abortion response

Isolate the affected mare after any abortion, contact your veterinarian and collect the aborted foetus and placenta (using gloves and a strong plastic bag) for laboratory examination.

Keep in-contact mares in small groups and segregated from other horses until they abort or foal.

EHV1 can survive at the abortion site, in horse hair, horse gear etc for up to 2 weeks if not adequately cleaned and disinfected. Abortion/birth fluids should be thoroughly cleaned away and the area disinfected with a standard disinfectant. Keep other horses away from the abortion site for at least 2 weeks after disinfecting it.

After an EHV1 abortion, it is recommended that the aborted mare be kept isolated for at least 4 weeks. After that, she can be regarded as a dry mare and breed again. The aborted mare's long term prospects are good – the experience is unlikely to affect future conception and it is rare for such mares to abort again with EHV-1.

Prevention

Some routine biosecurity measures can help minimise the risk of this disease on your property

- Ensure all abortion events are investigated by your veterinarian, including laboratory examination
- Minimise the risk of stress for pregnant mares (ie overcrowding, poor feed etc) and avoid travel later than 2 months before foaling
- Keep pregnant mares separate from other horses
- Keep pregnant mares in small groups
- Keep resident mares separate from visiting mares where possible
- Visiting mares should undergo a quarantine period, in small groups, of about 3 weeks on arrival
- Have isolation facilities on your property
- If you employ staff, ensure they know what to do in the event of an abortion (see above)
- Discuss EHV-1 vaccine with your vet, it may help reduce the risk of abortion in your case
- Keep good records of horse movements, both within your property and on-and-off the property

Further information

Contact your vet.

To report signs of EHV1

Phone 1800 675 888. Your vet may report on your behalf.