

Ask A Vet: West Nile Virus Season is Here

Sunday, September 14, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Have you heard of many West Nile cases in horses this year? Will it be worse than normal this year?

Dear Reader,

This question brings an excellent opportunity to talk about an important threat to our equine friends. West Nile Virus is a disease that can cause severe illness and neurologic symptoms. It has been established in the United States now for well over a decade and unfortunately it is here to stay. In our practice, mid-August to frost brings dozens of cases in unvaccinated horses every year.

So how exactly do horses get West Nile Virus? It is mostly a disease carried by different species of birds and spread by mosquito bites. As the mosquito bites infected birds the virus collects in its salivary glands. The mosquito can then spread the virus to other animals and people. This becomes much more likely by late summer and early fall when the virus has been able to build in the mosquito and bird population all summer. Once spread to other species such as horses or people, the virus is not typically contagious and is said to have reached a dead end. However, it can cause major illness or death for these "dead end hosts." It does seem to have the most severe effect on horses, with as high as thirty or forty percent of cases being fatal even with treatment. The virus usually attacks the central nervous system, causing encephalitis. Symptoms usually consist of weakness, fever, muscle twitches, and even paralysis. Horses make up around ninety seven percent of the non-human West Nile cases. Thankfully, the virus has no major effect on the other domestic species such as dogs, cats, cattle ECT.

Horses cannot spread the disease directly to other horses or people, but an infected horse means there are infectious mosquitoes nearby that could be carrying enough virus to infect other horses or people. The good news for your horses is that there are some excellent vaccines available which have around a ninety five percent protection rate. Vaccination with an approved West Nile vaccine is the essential part of prevention. Mosquito control and repellent is also important. Keeping fans on horses that are stalled at night will reduce mosquito activity drastically. Also, reducing the amount of standing water around your barn will cut mosquito reproduction. None of these measures take the place of vaccination when it comes to preventing this disease. We start seeing cases in unvaccinated horses in mid August, peaking during the month of September, and continuing until we have a mosquito ridding frost.

Our rainy summer and ample mosquito breeding areas could spell West Nile trouble this fall. If you have questions about controlling this disease or just want to learn more about this virus, consult your veterinarian and or the Center for Disease Control website.

-Dr. Justin Sellon