

Ask A Vet: Coggins Test is Vital to Contain and Monitor Disease

Sunday, October 11, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

We own horses, and we are reminded to have a Coggins test performed on our horses each year before we go on rides, cross state lines, go to fair, etc. We have faithfully done this each year, but I have no idea what is the Coggins test and why is it so important?

Dear Reader,

When going out to farms and looking at these horses, I answer this question all of the time. The Coggins test is an important part of equine healthcare and disease monitoring. The test was developed by Dr. Leroy Coggins, a veterinarian from North Carolina, in the 1970's. The test is performed to see if your horse has been exposed to the Equine Infectious Anemia (EIA) virus. This is a virus that is primarily spread by blood sucking insects (mainly horseflies and deerflies) between horses that are close together. It can also be spread if a needle is used on an infected horse, and then used again on another horse. This is why it is very important to change needles each time injections are given between horses.

The test can only be run at certain labs, and frequently takes several days for the result to come back. This is why we cannot provide lab results instantly, and ask that you prepare for any trips by having a Coggins test run well in advance (minimum of 10 days) prior to any expected travel.

The US Department of Agriculture maintains strict control over this test. Veterinarians must use specific paperwork and document the horse's location as well as any markings on the horse, including tattoos and brands. We also must undergo a special accreditation process to permit us to perform these tests. In the 1970's and 1980's, 3 in every 100 horses tested positive for EIA. With the added monitoring and removing or isolating positive horses, we are now only finding a handful of cases each year.

If a horse tests positive for EIA, the federal government becomes involved in the case. The infected horse must be isolated within 24 hours of the positive test. Isolation in this case means that they must be no closer than 200 yards to any other horse, donkey, mule, or pony. A federal veterinarian is sent to retest the horse to ensure that he/she is truly positive. The veterinarian also tests all other horses in the surrounding area to make sure the virus has not spread. With a positive animal, the options are permanent identification of the horse, registration with the federal registry, and permanent isolation from all other horses, or euthanasia.

There is not enough space to discuss the clinical signs of the disease in this article, but your regular veterinarian can answer these questions. Hopefully you better understand what the test is for and why we must run it every year.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman