

Ask A Vet: Shipping Fever - A Common Respiratory Problem

Sunday, July 13 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

We will be trailering our horses to many local and not so local shows this summer. What are some good ways to prevent shipping fever?

Dear Reader,

Transporting horses is usually a routine affair, as far as the horse is concerned. But some trailer rides, lasting as short as two hours, can lead to respiratory disease in the days immediately following. The common name for this is "shipping fever". It is characterized by clear to thick nasal discharge, coughing, and fever leading to a lack of appetite. Clinical cases range from mild to severe, with the worst ending in pneumonia or deep lung infection. It is typically contagious to other horses in the vicinity. Isolation with adequate biosecurity measures and prompt veterinary care are essential to rapid recovery.

Some of the best preventative measures can be done before you even leave the farm. The first rule is to never ship a sick horse. If your horse is running a fever, has a snotty nose, or is feeling poorly in any way, contact your veterinarian for help in determining if he can safely travel. Upper respiratory infections in particular can interfere with the horse's ability to clear mucous and debris from his lungs and trachea. Make sure you have vaccinated for the common respiratory viruses such as rhinopneumonitis and influenza adequately. All horses should receive these at least annually and show horses several times in a show season. Adequate ventilation without drafts in the trailer is essential. Exhaust fumes, dust, ammonia from urine and carbon dioxide from respiration can build up in a tight enclosure. Thick bedding in the form of shavings will help mitigate the urine odors. If the trip will be several hours, stop for a few minutes and clean out the manure and urine soaked material.

Most trailered horses are hauled with their head tied up. Studies have shown that this can interfere with the clearance of foreign particles from the lungs and upper respiratory system. Letting your horse lower his head when you make stops can help to clear these particles. A significant source of debris and dust arise from the hay many horses are hauled with. Soaking the hay in water for 10 minutes before loading the horse trailer will cut down on circulating foreign material.

After arrival, your horse should be bright, alert, and willing to eat and drink within one to two hours. Monitor his rectal temperature daily and look for any coughing or nasal discharge. While shipping fever can take up to three days to become evident, most horses will come down with symptoms within 24 to 48 hours. Early monitoring means early detection and a quick return to enjoying the benefits of horse ownership.

-Dr. Wade Hammond