

The Vet's Corner**What is Strangles?**

by Brian Atwell, DVM

With the recent outbreak of strangles on the Big Island, I thought it might be helpful to review what strangles is and how to prevent it.

Strangles is a bacterial infection, *Streptococcus equi*, that typically infects the upper airway and lymph nodes of the horse's head and neck.

It's highly contagious and the primary sources of infection are infected horses or asymptomatic (outwardly healthy) shedders of the bacteria. The name, strangles, comes from the rare instance when the lymph nodes in the neck get so enlarged that they suffocate an affected horse.

Strangles was first reported in horses in 1251. It has continued to be a problem for horse owners since. The route of infection is generally through the mouth and nasal mucosa. Infected horses and fomites, such as common water and feed containers, are equally likely to cause an infection.

The first symptoms can vary, but generally start with a purulent (pus-like) nasal discharge and enlargement of the lymph nodes. Other signs can be fever, loss of appetite, listlessness or depression and difficulty swallowing. Enlarged lymph nodes can rupture externally or internally and cause infection of the guttural pouches. Respiratory noises or distress can develop, and horses may stand with an extended head and neck. If the condition worsens and spreads to lymph nodes outside of the head and neck, then it's referred to as "bastard strangles." This is a life-threatening case and must be dealt with immediately. Bastard strangles can occur in as many as 20% of cases, has a much higher fatality rate, and requires intensive treatment.

So, how does this disease get around? It's not a very hearty organism but is highly contagious. The problem comes from horses that are exposed and shedding the bacteria into the environment but not showing any symptoms. About 20% of horses exposed to the bacteria will shed it back into the environment for several weeks after recovering. A very small percentage of horses can continue to shed for months or even years! These apparently healthy horses move from farm to farm and can infect previously unexposed horses.

If your horse gets strangles, what is the usual treatment? Every case is different, but if the symptoms fit, the first thing you should do is isolate the suspect horse and call your veterinarian. The typical treatment involves mainly supportive care and anti-inflammatory medications such as Bute or Banamine. It's controversial, but at this time most veterinarians do not recommend antibiotic therapy because it can increase the incidence of bastard strangles. Occasionally, your vet may lance the lymph nodes to allow drainage of the purulent material, but remember that the draining material is highly infectious. If the disease has spread or has gotten severe, penicillin is most often used as the initial treatment. Early treatment can prevent immunity but can also help prevent the spread of the disease.

Strangles is a reportable disease and I cannot over-emphasize how important isolation is.

Do not allow the suspect horse to leave the farm or contact other horses. Your clothes and cleaning supplies can also spread the disease, so any infected horses should be fed, watered, and treated last, and preferably by a different individual not in contact with the rest of the herd. Any horse with a fever (>101.5 degrees F) should also be isolated.

Disinfect hands, clothing, stalls and equipment to help stop the spread of this disease. Do not spread manure or shavings from infected horses in any common areas.

Does vaccination protect my horses? Vaccination is the most common form of prevention but does not guarantee protection. It will likely reduce the disease severity in horses that may become infected. The most common form of vaccination is an intranasal vaccine that is a modified live form of the disease. This means it will stimulate the immune system to remember the bacteria but not cause

an actual infection. An intramuscular vaccine is also available, but does not provide the same local immunity that intranasal vaccines do. If you have an infected horse on your property, it is not recommended that you vaccinate during the outbreak. Vaccines are only recommended for horses that are healthy with no fever or signs of a nasal discharge.

So what horses should be vaccinated?

That's something you should discuss with your veterinarian. Conditions in Hawaii are different than the mainland in that we have a somewhat isolated population. Typically, horses that travel frequently and are in contact with a varied population are good candidates for immunization. If your horse has not had a previous vaccination for strangles, the initial vaccination requires a series of vaccinations to adequately immunize your horse. Most horses require 3-4 weeks for immunity to develop so be sure you plan in advance of any travel.

How can I prevent exposing my horses to strangles? Prevention of this disease can be difficult but with diligent care you can reduce your horses' exposure. New horses should be isolated from the herd for 2-3 weeks. Individual water and feed buckets should be used and disinfected regularly. When you travel, bring your own grooming supplies and feed buckets to help reduce the risk of exposure. And if you suspect strangles, call your vet! 🐾



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