

The name game

Understanding the technical terms surrounding rabies will help you better communicate with your veterinarian.

- **AAEP** – the American Association of Equine Practitioners, a speciality group for equine veterinarians.
- **Encephalitis** – inflammation of the brain, often caused by a virus. Rabies results in encephalitis.
- **Core vaccines** – the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) defines core vaccinations as those “that protect from diseases that are endemic to a region, those with potential public health significance, required by law, virulent/highly infectious, and/or those posing a risk of severe disease. Core vaccines have clearly demonstrated efficacy and safety, and thus exhibit a high-enough level of patient benefit and low-enough level of risk to justify their use in the majority of patients.” The following equine vaccines meet these criteria and are identified as “core” in the AAEP Vaccination Guidelines: Tetanus, Eastern/Western Equine Encephalomyelitis, West Nile virus and Rabies.
- **Reservoirs** – animals that harbor infectious diseases, allowing them to be transmitted to horses. Skunks, racoons, foxes and bats are examples of the reservoirs for rabies.

Does your veterinarian recommend rabies vaccination for your horse?

Rabies is out there: The bat in the trees, the fox on the bridle path, the skunk in the pasture, the raccoon in your barn. And while the odds are low your horse will get rabies, the odds are virtually zero that he will recover from rabies. So why risk it?

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Rabies and Your Horse:

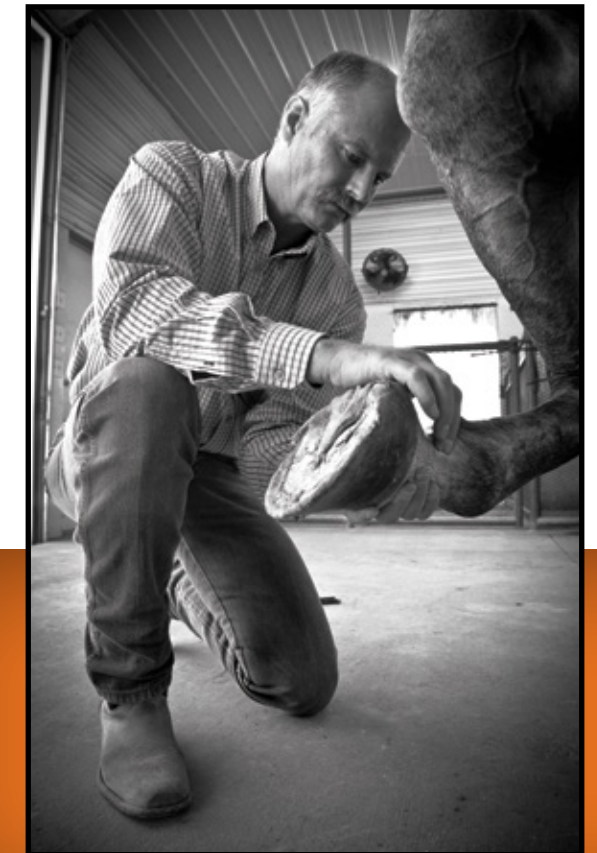
What you need to know about this fatal disease.



You, your horse and your veterinarian: The first line of defense

A little less spring in his step. A slightly duller coat. You can tell when your horse just isn't doing right. Luckily, you have a partner ready to help get your horse back on track: Your veterinarian.

But even with the best skills and training, a veterinarian can't perform miracles. When it comes to equine illnesses, the best course of action is prevention — through recommended vaccinations and other health-management practices.



The reality of rabies

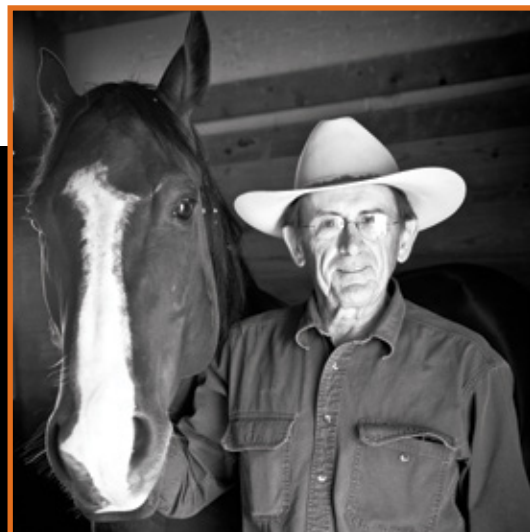
With fewer than 100 cases of rabies reported in horses, donkeys and burros every year, it's easy to disregard the disease. **But while the incidence of rabies in the United States is low, the fatality rate is high — 100 percent. Furthermore, there is always the significant and serious potential for human exposure with any case of rabies.**

That's why the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) has made rabies a core vaccine, meaning rabies vaccination is recommended for every horse, every year, regardless of geography or lifestyle.

Over the past 20 years, the number of rabies cases in both wildlife and domestic animals has increased. Typically, more than 9,000 total cases of rabies are reported in the United States every year. The rise of rabies is due, in large part, to the increased urbanization of areas where the disease is endemic in wildlife populations.

Transmission

Just because your horse doesn't live in the woods doesn't mean he's out of the woods. **Horses in barns as well as horses in pastures are likely to be exposed to rabid animals.** Rabid animals can easily find their way into closed barns, climb up rafters and even enter stalls.



Horses contract rabies through the bite of an infected (rabid) animal, such as a raccoon, fox, skunk or bat. These bites typically occur on the horse's face and muzzle or lower limbs. It's easy to mistake a rabies bite as simply a scratch, or not notice it at all.

Once bitten, the virus migrates via the horse's peripheral nerves to the brain where it initiates rapidly progressive, invariably fatal encephalitis. The incubation period — the time between the virus' entry into the body and the onset of clinical signs — averages two to nine weeks, but may be as long as 15 months.

Clinical signs

Equine rabies can take on many different clinical signs — signs that can be nonspecific and confusing. For this reason, the disease is frequently misdiagnosed at first. Veterinarians often state that rabies "can look like anything."

The most commonly reported clinical signs include:

- Colic
- Ataxia (incoordination)
- Urinary incontinence
- Fever
- Aggressiveness
- Hyperesthesia (increased sensitivity)
- Lameness
- Paralysis
- Muscle tremors
- Depression
- Convulsions
- Abnormal vocalization

Because of the extreme variability in clinical signs, it's difficult to make generalizations. However, most rabid horses exhibit some degree of hyperesthesia, fever and neurological signs (ataxia and/or paralysis) at some point during the course of the disease.



AAEP considers rabies a core vaccine — one every horse should receive. As a result, more veterinarians are now encouraging horse owners to vaccinate against this important disease.

While some horses exhibit intermittent or continuous signs of aggression, most infected horses are depressed or stuporous. Some may become anorexic and refuse to drink, while others will continue to eat and drink until shortly before death. Occasionally, horses exhibit signs of bruxism (grinding of the teeth). Obscure lameness and posterior ataxia (incoordination) are relatively common early signs.

In most horses, the progression of the disease is rapid with death in three to five days following the onset of clinical signs. Prior to death, most horses will become recumbent with convulsions and/or a comatose state and violent thrashing. Rabies infection in the unvaccinated horse is always fatal.

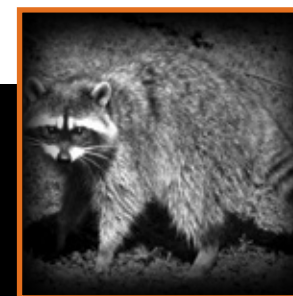
Diagnosis

There is no definitive test to diagnose rabies in a live animal. The highly variable, non-specific clinical signs — along with the lack of accurate diagnostic tests — make the diagnosis of rabies in the live horse very difficult. That's why a rabies diagnosis is most often made only after death during post-mortem examination of the brain.

The only way to rule out rabies is to wait and see. Rabies generally progresses rapidly, so if undiagnosed neurological signs have not rapidly progressed within the first five days, rabies is most likely not the cause. **Because of the serious threat for human exposure when handling a horse with rabies, any suspected case of equine rabies should be handled as if it were positive until proven otherwise.**



Skunks



Raccoons



Foxes



Bats

Know the enemy

In North America, these are the most predominant natural reservoirs for rabies.

Treatment

Currently, no treatment for horses exists. The disease is invariably fatal once clinical signs appear.

Prevention

Without a cure, rabies prevention becomes crucial. Vaccination of companion animals, including horses, against rabies cannot be overemphasized. All horses are potentially at risk and should be vaccinated.

Consider these points in regards to vaccination:

- The incidence of rabies in both wild and domestic animals is on the rise
- It's not uncommon for pastured or stalled horses to be unknowingly exposed to wildlife
- Most exposures aren't noticed, and most bite wounds aren't found
- There's significant and serious potential for human exposure from an infected animal
- Equine rabies cases are invariably fatal
- Vaccination of horses against rabies is generally safe and highly protective