

Travelling with your horse

by Dr. Christa Harder

Winter is finally over and it is now the time of year where everyone is out with their horses competing in shows or rodeos, travelling to clinics or going camping with their horses. With the increased amount of travel, more horses are in contact with other horses and the potential to pick up more sickness is a lot higher.

Each individual horse has variable levels of protection towards common illnesses depending on several factors such as age, contact with other horses and stress. Some of the common bugs that are often circulating through the horses population includes strangles, influenza and herpes virus. Typically it takes 3-10 days for horses to show symptoms towards any of these diseases once they first become infected.

Influenza and herpes virus will look like a cold; coughing, nasal discharge, lethargic, decreased appetite and a fever. Strangles will show similar symptoms as well as lumps under or around the jaw that may or may not abscess and drain thick, white discharge. Strangles is the most highly contagious of the three and will spread quickly to in contact horses.

There is an excellent intramuscular vaccine that helps protect horses against influenza and herpes as well as an intranasal vaccine that helps protect horses against strangles.

If your horse becomes infected with any of these 3 diseases it could mean a significant amount of time off from competition before you are able to travel with them again; therefore prevention is key. A few other less common infectious diseases include west nile virus, equine infectious anemia (swamp fever), equine encephalitis (sleeping sickness), neurologic herpes.

When at a show or competition, do not allow your horse nose to nose contact with any unfamiliar horses and do not tie them in a common tie up area where they can nuzzle other horses or objects in contact with these horses. Ideally keep your horse tied up to your own trailer when not in competition. Use your own water buckets and do not share with other unfamiliar horses. When using competition stabling make sure the stall is clean to start with fresh bedding and even consider using a disinfectant spray to clean the walls prior to putting your horse inside.

Long periods of travel in a trailer can also predispose your horse to developing shipping fever. Shipping fever is the common term for a bacterial pneumonia that can develop in their lungs. These horses can get quite sick very quickly starting with a high fever and then progressing to increased respiratory effort, pain and depression. When a horse stands for long periods of time with its head elevated (+/-poor ventilation) it severely compromise's the lungs ability to clear bacteria and debris. Horses should be given as much freedom of movement of their heads as is safe. If feeding horses during transport make sure the hay is not dusty or keep it watered down. Also, clean bedding regularly to avoid poor air quality from feces/urine. Do not haul a horse that has any signs of starting to get sick since it will only get worse during the trip.

Another thing to keep in mind when travelling on long trips with your horse is to take frequent breaks. Unload, feed and water every 4-6 hours. Sometimes bringing your own water along or giving the horse electrolytes prior to transport will encourage them to keep drinking. Try to limit the amount of time in the trailer to 12 hours in one day.

During hot weather be aware of the air temperature inside the trailer. Trailers without open ventilation will often get quite warm inside, open vents if needed to keep air circulating and keep the horses from sweating excessively.

Travel season is more stressful on a horse and there is a higher likelihood of them colicing or developing stomach ulcers. Colic and ulcers will both often look like stomach pain, kicking at belly, trying to go down and rolling. Colic can progress and get quite severe therefore seeking veterinary care is advisable. Gastric ulcers will typically resolve but if symptoms recur we do administer medication to prevent and treat them.

Lastly, always have a first aid kit on hand in case something happens. We have first aid kits at the clinic for purchase or we can help you put together a kit of useful items depending on your needs.

Show and travel season is a fun time for you and your horse but there are more risks involved; therefore, doing what you can to prevent these, "not-so-fun" illnesses, is always recommended! All of us at the Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic wish you all the best of luck with all your horse activities this summer and are here for you should you have questions or need our medical care!