

Perspectives on Biosecurity Efforts of Mississippi Horse Owners

Infectious disease can move through the horse industry faster than many owners realize. Horses travel, return home, and share spaces. They also encounter other animals, people, trailers, buckets, and equipment along the way. Because of this, one sick horse can quickly affect an entire barn, event, or facility. Biosecurity should not begin only when there is an outbreak, but it should be part of everyday horse care. Since horses are transported and handled more often than other livestock species, consistent prevention is especially important.

What Is Biosecurity?

Biosecurity simply means taking practical steps to reduce the chance of disease entering your property or spreading from horse to horse. The steps do not need to be complicated, but they do need to be consistent. Good biosecurity is really just good horsemanship; it protects horse health, reduces stress on owners, and helps prevent avoidable outbreaks before they become costly and troublesome.

Keep in mind that with biosecurity, a proactive approach is always better than reacting after the disease is already moving through a barn or event. Recent outbreaks of equine herpesvirus type 1 (EHV-1) in the United States have shown just how vulnerable the equine industry can be when biosecurity breaks down. What may begin as a localized problem can quickly spread when horses leave showgrounds, return home, and resume normal routines before clear guidance is in place. In these situations, horse owners, trainers, and event staff often overlook isolation, monitoring, and other key preventive steps, allowing disease to spread across barns, facilities, and even state lines. That is exactly why biosecurity is essential, not optional.

Common Equine Diseases

The following are common equine diseases:

- **EHV-1** – often causes fever, coughing, and mild nasal discharge; in some cases, can lead to the neurologic form, equine herpesvirus myeloencephalopathy (EHM)

- **EHM** – may cause weakness, lack of coordination, urinary problems, difficulty standing, and sometimes death
- **equine infectious anemia (EIA)** – affects the blood and immune systems, spreads mainly from biting insects or contaminated needles, and remains especially serious because infected horses may become lifelong carriers; no cure or vaccine
- **equine viral arteritis (EVA)** – can affect both the respiratory and reproductive systems, causing fever, nasal discharge, limb swelling, and abortion in pregnant mares
- **strangles** – a highly contagious bacterial disease, often causes fever, thick nasal discharge, cough, and swollen or abscessed lymph nodes
- **equine piroplasmosis** – affects red blood cells and may cause fever, anemia, jaundice, weakness, and dark urine; spread mainly by ticks

Although these diseases differ in how they spread and what signs they cause, they all remind horse owners that everyday biosecurity matters.

Early Warning Signs and Quick Actions to Take

Early isolation, clean equipment, insect and tick control, routine testing, and caution when traveling or introducing new horses are some of the most important steps owners can take to protect their horses and limit spread of disease. Owners often overlook the early signs of infectious disease, allowing it to spread quickly. They do not need to memorize every disease or become experts in every pathogen. Watch for early warning signs and act quickly. Fever is often the first clue, sometimes appearing before a more serious illness. Owners should also watch for coughing, nasal discharge, diarrhea, dullness, poor appetite, swollen lymph nodes, and neurologic signs such as stumbling, weakness, or trouble standing.

Because some horses can spread disease before they look sick, waiting too long can increase the risk to others. Isolate new horses and horses returning from travel for at least 14 days, check their temperature and health each day, keep their

equipment separate, and handle them last when possible. Avoid sharing buckets, tack, thermometers, grooming tools, and stall equipment, as these can spread disease between horses. Maintaining good hygiene, conducting regular cleaning and disinfection, limiting horse-to-horse contact, and keeping vaccination and testing records current all help create a strong first line of defense.

Conclusion

In the end, biosecurity is not about fear. It is about preparation. Overlooked precautions often drive disease spread, which means owners have more control than they may think. By making biosecurity part of everyday horse management, horse owners can protect their own animals and help protect the wider equine community.

Take These Immediate Actions

- Isolate any horse with a fever, cough, nasal discharge, or sudden weakness.
- Stop sharing water buckets, feed tubs, tack, and grooming tools.

- Take the horse's temperature daily after travel or exposure to other horses.
- Call your veterinarian as soon as you notice unusual signs.

Make These Easy Changes on Your Farm

- Keep new horses separate for at least 14 days.
- Use separate equipment for sick, new, or returning horses.
- Wash your hands and disinfect tools between horses.
- Clean buckets, stalls, and trailers regularly.
- Control flies and ticks around barns and pastures.
- Always use sterile needles and never share them.

Adopt These Good Habits to Help Prevent Problems

- Keep Coggins test, vaccination, and health records up to date.
- Avoid nose-to-nose contact at shows, events, or boarding facilities.
- Handle healthy horses first and sick or isolated horses last.
- Watch horses closely after travel, shows, or new arrivals.
- Report concerns early rather than waiting for signs to worsen.

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