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Western College of Veterinary Medicine suspends equine clinical services to control potential spread of virus among horses

The Western College of Veterinary Medicine's Large Animal Clinic at the University of Saskatchewan is not accepting any non-emergency equine patients to control the potential spread of equine herpes virus type 1 (EHV-1) infection.

The WCVM voluntarily suspended its equine clinical services on June 21 following the confirmed diagnosis of EHV-1 in a horse from the Saskatoon area that was brought to the clinic on June 18. While tests results are still pending, WCVM veterinarians suspect the horse was suffering from the neurologic form of EHV-1, also called equine herpesvirus myeloencephalopathy (EHM). The horse was humanely euthanized due to the severity of the disease.

EHV is a common equine virus to which nearly all horses are exposed during their lifetime. EHV usually causes mild respiratory disease, but in some cases, the virus can spread to other parts of the body. In rare cases, the virus can affect spinal tissue and cause the neurological form of EHV-1 to develop.

EHV-1 is not transmissible to humans and most animal species, but the virus is highly contagious among horses and camelids (llamas and alpacas). It's spread by aerosol transmission — when affected horses sneeze or cough — or through direct contact.

“Because EHV is a contagious disease, we have placed all of our remaining equine patients under quarantine to minimize the risk of further disease transmission among horses,” says Dr. Chris Clark, a specialist in large animal internal medicine at the WCVM. “We've cancelled any routine elective appointments for horses at the WCVM Large Animal Clinic, but the WCVM's equine field service is operating normally and we are still accepting any emergency equine cases.”

The WCVM's Small Animal Clinic as well as all other services offered by the WCVM and its Veterinary Teaching Hospital are not affected by the voluntary suspension of equine clinical services. The WCVM will resume regular equine clinical services at its Large Animal Clinic once the risk to other horses has been resolved.

The WCVM is working closely with the affected horse's owners who have voluntarily quarantined their farm. Other horses on their premises have not shown any clinical signs of EHV-1. Clark stresses that this is not an EHV disease outbreak and all measures are only being taken to prevent the potential spread to other farms.

In the past six weeks, provincial and state veterinary health authorities have reported multiple cases of EHV-1 in horses that attended or were in contact with other horses that competed at a national cutting horse competition in Ogden, Utah. The affected horse at the WCVM Large Animal Clinic did not attend the show and was not in contact with any horses participating in the event.

If horses are being transported to shows, clinics or other public events, Clark recommends that all riders and owners should thoroughly wash their hands after handling horses, minimize contact between horses from other herds and not allow horses to drink from communal water troughs or buckets.

For further information about EHV-1, horse owners are urged to contact their local veterinarian or go to www.wcvm.com and download an EHV fact sheet.

For more information, contact:

Myrna MacDonald, Communications
Western College of Veterinary Medicine, U of S
Tel: 306-225-4479 • Cell: 306-291-9950
sm.ridley@sasktel.net