

Redwings' Welfare Team is proactive in the promotion of equine care and welfare, believing that access to accurate and up-to-date information is vital if owners and carers are to meet the needs of their animal.

Redwings' welfare leaflets are designed to provide an overview of many important issues which are encountered regularly in welfare cases with which the Sanctuary is involved. The series includes information on the following topics:

- Laminitis
- Hoof Care and Farriery
- Worms and De-worming
- Food, Digestion and Energy
- Behaviour
- Veteran Horses and Retirement
- Horse Psychology
- Donkeys
- Cushings

To request copies of leaflets or to speak to one of the team about any equine welfare issues, please feel free to contact the department by post, phone or email.

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Incorporating Ada Cole
Memorial Stables

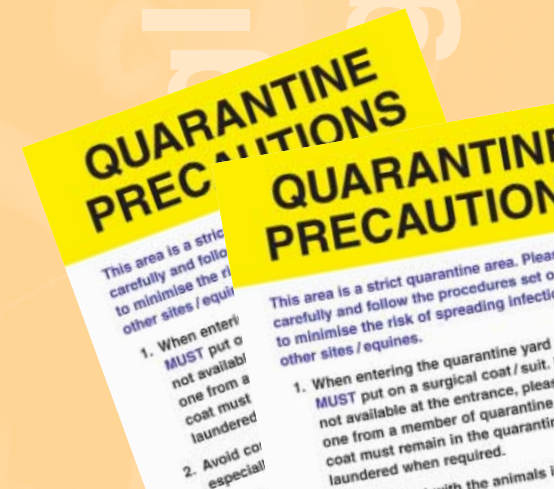
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Strangles

Staying in Control



“With a practical approach to both avoiding and treating strangles, the disease can be tackled successfully.”



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Strangles – Staying In Control

Strangles seems to be laden with more unhelpful stigmas and misunderstandings than any other equine veterinary condition in the UK. The debilitation experienced by a sufferer and the potential for fatality in equines made vulnerable by age or other conditions should never be underestimated. But with a practical approach to both avoiding and treating strangles, the disease can be tackled successfully and outbreaks prevented or limited.

With a close knit population of over 1,000 equines, no one has a more vested interest in keeping strangles at arms length than Redwings Horse Sanctuary. Many of our residents are very young, very elderly or have long term veterinary conditions, meaning that should an outbreak of the disease occur within our pastures, the results would be absolutely devastating. Yet on more than one occasion, Redwings has accepted a known strangles-positive equine into its care, so confident are we in the ability of our team to treat the equine whilst at the same time successfully protecting our established herds. The fact that we are able to do this when needed demonstrates how sound knowledge of the disease and vigilant quarantining procedures can very effectively contain and eliminate the strangles bacteria.

What is Strangles?

Strangles is a common, highly contagious disease that attacks an equine's respiratory

system. The proper name for the bacterium is *Streptococcus equi*. There are other bacteria in the same family (such as *Streptococcus zooepidemicus*) but these are not as contagious and therefore not as problematic. The term 'strangles' is derived from one of the symptoms of the disease; an abscess in the back of the throat which can lead to internal swelling and even a collapse of the airways, effectively 'strangling' the sufferer. This is not common, however, and early diagnosis and treatment of the condition should prevent this distressing scenario.



Discoloured nasal discharge should always be investigated by a vet.

Earlier and more widespread symptoms of strangles are a snotty nose (with discoloured rather than clear mucus), weepy eyes, a cough, loss of appetite, fever and general poor health and debilitation. Swelling under the jaw (in the soft area between the jaw bones) or behind the cheek bones can indicate swollen lymph nodes and are also a symptom of advanced strangles. Any symptoms should always be seen promptly



by a vet for accurate diagnosis and treatment. As soon as strangles is known or suspected to be present, all movement of horses to and from the site must be stopped to prevent the disease being transported elsewhere.

Strangles should not, as a rule, be more serious than an unpleasant bout of flu for a person (proper flu, not man-flu!). With veterinary support and lots of nursing, a healthy equine with a robust immune system can gradually rid itself of the unwanted bacteria in around three weeks and should then return to good health. But in an equine whose health is already compromised, particularly if their immune system is weak, the strangles can take a much more serious hold on the body and will need extra veterinary intervention to reduce the risk of fatality.

One of the reasons strangles is so widely feared amongst the equine owning community is its ability to spread widely and rapidly. **Strangles is not an airborne disease; it relies on being passed from**

one equine to another by physical transfer of bacteria. An equine can contract strangles either by coming into direct contact with the carrier or by having the bacteria passed to it through the sharing of water, pasture, stabling or equipment. Hands, boots and clothing are a common source of contamination as people move between horses and between sites. Muck is also a potential source of easy cross contamination.

Strangles bacteria can survive outside a host for several months. Warm and humid conditions will suit it best, being most like the environment within a horse's body. It will not survive temperatures below freezing and over 50°C, but a disinfectant that is known to kill off strangles is definitely the most practical tool for tackling the disease.

Complications

In a few cases, strangles will lead to more complex and life threatening conditions. They are thankfully uncommon, but it is important that horse owners are aware of these possibilities and watch carefully for other symptoms or deterioration of condition beyond the expected progression of the diagnosed disease.

Bastard Strangles is almost always fatal. In these cases, infection spreads outside the lymph system within the head to other parts of the body, often the intestines or lungs, where multiple abscesses form. This complication can occur weeks or even

months after the equine has recovered from the original illness. A horse with bastard strangles will not be contagious to other equines unless they are also a carrier.

Purpura Haemorrhagica is also a thankfully rare condition. It occurs within four weeks of the original strangles symptoms emerging and is caused by a complication within the immune system as it works to fight the strangles bacteria which causes damage to blood vessels around the body. This leads to severe swelling in the limbs, head and other areas of the equine's body.

Hidden Dangers

A particular feature of the strangles disease which makes it widely feared is its ability to lurk inside an equine who is not showing any symptoms of illness. These equines are



Innocent looking Daisy came to Redwings as a strangles carrier. Following intensive treatment she is now able to mix safely with other ponies.

known as 'carriers' and they are equines who have had strangles in the past and recovered, but retained some bacteria in

their guttural pouches (located at the top of the nasal passages) which can then survive undetected for months or even years. A carrier is able to 'shed' the bacteria and pass them on to other equines who do then become ill. If a carrier lives in close proximity with several equines, on a yard or in a sanctuary for example, strangles can spread rapidly until the source of the outbreak is identified and equines coming and going from the site can easily take the disease with them to establish further outbreaks elsewhere.

Control Measures

Understanding how strangles works is the key to preventing its spread. Running a successful quarantine to prevent the disease being passed between equines, or even better, to prevent equines from contracting it in the first place is perfectly achievable if everyone concerned has the knowledge and commitment to abide by the strict quarantine principles.

At Redwings, all new arrivals to the Sanctuary are kept under quarantine until our veterinary team have established that they are clear from strangles. This is done using an endoscope to look at each guttural pouch and flush through a solution which can then be sent away for testing. Testing for strangles can also be done using nasal swabs, but the test needs to be carried out three times over a two week period and is not as accurate as the single endoscopy test.

Redwings' Equine Reception Centre operates as a completely separate site and not until every equine on the site is known to be clear from the disease are equines transferred to other Centres. Until the all clear is received, all procedures are carried out in anticipation of a positive result on any of the equines. If a positive result is received, our vets clear the guttural pouches and administer antibiotic flushes until two further samples both test negative. All other equines within the quarantine area (who will already have tested negative for the disease)



Redwings' vets are very skilled at using an endoscope. It is a quick and painless procedure in the right hands.

are retained for three weeks to allow any strangles that has been passed on to them to incubate. If no equine shows any symptoms within that time, the group are then free to be integrated safely with other equines.



Clear signs must be put up at all entrances to a quarantine area to make the restrictions quite clear.

and applies a real attention to detail to everything they do whilst in the quarantine vicinity. Any contact with something that the horse could have touched or sneezed on must be dealt with carefully to ensure no contaminated matter can find its way outside the restricted area.

Overalls are essential for quarantine. They need to cover all clothing : pay particular attention to necklines, cuffs and trouser bottoms. Each time the quarantine area is left the overalls should be removed and ideally put straight into a tub of disinfectant solution. Don't reuse overalls as it is virtually impossible to put them on again without the external surface coming into contact with the clothes they are supposed to protect. Don't spend time turning arms and legs the right way out either, as putting your arm down a trouser leg to pull it back simply wipes whatever is on the outside onto your nice clean sleeve which you have just worn the

Quarantine

Whilst there are basic principles to running a quarantine area successfully, the key to keeping risk to an absolute minimum is to ensure that anyone who enters the area understands how strangles is spread

overalls to protect! It is lots of attention to detail like this that makes all the difference to a successful quarantine. Overalls and any possibly contaminated clothing must be washed on a cycle of at least 60°C if they have not been soaked in disinfectant first.

A foot dip of suitable disinfectant should be well placed so that everyone exiting the area can dunk their feet thoroughly. Make sure the disinfectant washes over the top of the boot or shoe as well and even onto the bottom of trouser legs if the person has been mucking out the stable whereby shavings or straw may have got up the inside of the overall legs.

Handwash must also be available with the foot dip. Even if disposable gloves are in use, it is safest to disinfect the hands as well on exiting to allow for any unnoticed tears in the gloves or the possible transfer of bacteria whilst taking them off.

It is essential that the foot dip and handwash are made up to the appropriate solution according to the instructions and change them as often as necessary. Nothing would be more frustrating than going to all the trouble of running quarantine with a disinfectant that is not up to the job. Do not guess amounts and keep a bucket used purely for measuring somewhere obvious and very separate from feed and water buckets. Ensure stocks are checked and replenished well in advance of running out and that they are properly stored and

labelled. Ideally have one or two people responsible for checking and ordering stocks and keep a diary of every time the solutions are changed.



When setting up a quarantine facility, make sure the area has its own equipment and storage area.

All equipment used within the area should stay there for the duration of the quarantine process. Any item that does need to be removed for some reason must be completely and thoroughly disinfected. This applies to all stable equipment, haynets, buckets, headcollars and lead ropes, wheelbarrows, bags of feed, bales of shavings, straw and hay and so on. Special thought should be given to veterinary and farriery equipment that need to go in and out of the restricted area. Vets and farriers should be more than accomplished at dealing with quarantine procedures, but they must be made aware of the situation in advance and asked if there is anything extra that they would like to be provided for their visit.

Muck from a quarantine area is a high risk source of contamination and cannot be taken outside the restricted zone without a lot of thought and planning. Unfortunately, muck heaps create just the right conditions in which strangles bacteria can survive for

long periods. Composting muck at a temperature of over 60°C will ensure the bacteria are killed off, though professional support is advisable to ensure that the process is effective. Muck can also be incinerated but all waste disposal must comply with specific legislation relating to this activity. There are no easy answers to this particular aspect of strangles management and it needs to be thought through very carefully.

After the Event

It is important to remember that once an equine has recovered from a bout of strangles, they will still be shedding contagious bacteria for up to six weeks. This means that the quarantine must be vigilantly maintained beyond the disappearance of symptoms and veterinary advice should be sought before removing quarantine protection.

Once strangles has been successfully eradicated from the equines on a site, remember that the area where they have been living will almost certainly be harbouring the bacteria. Everything within the quarantine area must be thoroughly disinfected, including all walls, floors and ceilings of stables and any fences or turnout areas. Ideally, use a pressure washer to get into all the crevices and corners. There are no absolute rules when it comes to pasture that has been exposed to strangles bacteria. Fencing, field shelters, water troughs and the like must all be disinfected. A relatively bare

paddock will be unlikely to retain any contagious bacteria after a couple of hard frosts or a prolonged period of hot dry weather. However, any features like trees, hedges, ponds, logs or odd items that can provide protection from the elements will allow the risk factors to start creeping up. The risks may be tiny, but strangles management is all about reducing risks as far as is possible and looking at all the possibilities in order to make informed decisions.

Golden Rules:

- Make sure you know what strangles is and what the symptoms are
- Minimise risks, especially when at shows and events
- Have disinfectant and overalls on site 'just in case'.

And if strangles does rear its ugly head:

- Don't panic
- Quarantine any horse with symptoms
- Get veterinary treatment and advice
- Make sure everyone knows what is happening and why
- Stop horses moving on and off the site
- Don't take any risks.

For further information:

Redwings Welfare Team **01508 481008**
Animal Welfare Trust **www.aht.org.uk**
www.defra.gov.uk (waste disposal laws)