

African Horse Sickness

What is African horse sickness and what causes it?

African horse sickness is a serious, often fatal disease of horses, mules, and donkeys. The virus is spread by infected insects (biting midges) and causes fever and, heart and respiratory (breathing) problems in affected animals. Death is common and can occur suddenly. The disease primarily occurs in Africa, but outbreaks have been reported in Egypt, parts of the Middle East, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Pakistan and India. African horse sickness has not occurred in the United States.

What animals get African horse sickness?

African horse sickness can affect horses, donkeys, mules, zebras, camels and dogs. Zebras and donkeys rarely develop serious disease, but horses and mules can become very sick and often die.

How can my animal get African horse sickness?

African horse sickness is spread by biting midges (also called "punkies" or "no-see-ums") (**vector**). Mosquitoes and biting flies may also be able to transfer the virus. Dogs can become infected by eating (**oral**) contaminated horse meat.

How does African horse sickness affect my animal?

African horse sickness can cause respiratory (lung) disease, cardiac (heart) disease, or a cyclic fever. Death rates can be as high as 95% for some forms of the disease.

The pulmonary or respiratory form occurs rapidly (within days). Signs of disease include fever, difficulty breathing, coughing, sweating, and frothy discharge from the nostrils. Death usually occurs within a few hours after illness is seen.

The cardiac form of the disease causes fever and swelling (edema) around the eyes, lips, cheeks, tongue, and neck. Death usually occurs due to heart failure.

Some affected animals may have both pulmonary and cardiac signs of disease.

Some animals may only develop a cyclic fever (high in the afternoon, gone in the morning). These animals may also have depression and a decreased appetite. Animals with this horsesickness fever form of African horse sickness will typically recover.

Can I get African horse sickness?

No. Human cases of African horse sickness have never been reported.

Who should I contact if I suspect African horse sickness?

Contact your veterinarian immediately. African horse sickness is not found in the United States. Suspicion of disease requires immediate attention.

How can I protect my animals from African horse sickness?

The best way to protect animals from African horse sickness is to decrease their exposure to biting midges and other insects (e.g., mosquitoes and biting flies). Stabling horses in insect-proof housing, particularly between dusk and dawn when the insects are most active, can help prevent exposure. Insect repellents and insecticides may also be useful. Monitor your horse's temperature. Horses with fevers should be examined by your veterinarian.


For More Information

CFSPH Technical Fact Sheets. African horse sickness at <http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/DiseaseInfo/>

World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) at <http://www.oie.int>

United States Animal Health Association. Foreign Animal Diseases at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/emergency_response/downloads/nahems/fad.pdf

African Horse Sickness
is a severe, often fatal,
disease of equids,
spread by biting midges.



Circle inset show a biting midge. Photos from U.S. Department of Agriculture.