



Strangles: What you need to know

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Strangles is one of the most common equine contagious diseases diagnosed worldwide. It is endemic in the UK due to the number of horses that are silent “carriers” of the disease. These horses appear normal but shed bacteria spreading infection. Unfortunately, there is a stigma about admitting presence of Strangles on a yard which often slows diagnosis.

Clinical Signs



Signs vary in each case but include the following:

- Fever
- Depression
- Lethargy
- Anorexia
- Nasal discharge
- Swollen glands
- +/- Cough

The disease can take 2-10 days to manifest itself from the time of infection.

Transmission

Strangles is exceptionally contagious, but the bacteria causing the disease, *Streptococcus Equi equi*, is relatively easy to kill.

The disease is spread by contact only, it is not an air-borne disease. Contact can be either:

1. Direct: nose to nose contact between infected and normal horses.
2. Indirect: via equipment, e.g. feed buckets, water troughs, tack, mucking out utensils
3. Indirect: via shared personnel, e.g. groom, instructor, farrier, vet, yard dog/cat(s).

The Suspected Case

It is helpful to have a standard protocol to adhere to should you suspect a horse on the yard to be showing signs of Strangles. Early implementation of the protocol is crucial in optimising disease control.

An example of such a protocol is given below:

- Isolate the affected horse
- Stop all movement of horses on and off the premises.
- Call your vet to discuss diagnosis, treatment and management of the case.
- Contact the owners of all in contact horses to discuss the situation.
- Check temperatures of at risk horses at least once daily (normal is <math><38.5^{\circ}\text{C}</math>).
- Establish and implement communication lines to minimise confusion, i.e. vet-yard-owners.
- Put one person in charge of managing the veterinary treatments and appointments if possible.
- Notify adjacent premises, especially if horses are able to touch nose to nose over fencing.
- Do NOT release any horse from isolation, or off the premises until negative results for Strangles have been obtained.

Testing for Strangles

In an infected horse, a nasopharyngeal swab may be taken for culture and PCR (bacterial DNA) testing. A guttural pouch wash may be advised either in addition to, or instead of swabs.

Guidance on Isolation

- Prevent contact between suspected/confirmed cases; in contact horses and those who have not been in direct or indirect contact, by creating 3 separate groups. Keep a 25m perimeter area around the infected and in contact group.
 - If totally separate areas are not possible, board up grills in stables and use grills on stable doors.
 - Use separate equipment to water, feed, muck out and groom each horse to minimise spread of infection.
 - Minimise the number of people entering the infected zone. No dogs or cats should be permitted.
 - If the same person has to handle multiple horses in more than one group, change and disinfect protective clothing, gloves and footwear before moving between horses. Start in the clean area, move to the in contact area and then end up in the infected area.
 - Dispose of all used bedding, uneaten feed and water carefully. Spray with Virkon or Trigen on the muck heap to disinfect.
 - Protective clothing must be available at the entrance to isolation and disposed of properly (double bagged and taped shut).
- Once isolation is no longer required, all utensils and equipment should be thoroughly disinfected using either Virkon or Trigen.



Getting the all clear

Testing occurs 14 days after the last case has resolved, either with 3 nasopharyngeal swabs in a 2 week period or a guttural pouch endoscopy. If results are negative, the yard may reopen.

Prevention is Better Than Cure

When away from home: take your own buckets, water, feed and grooming kit and avoid sharing these where possible. If you do share, then disinfect the item between each use. Minimise direct contact spread by preventing nose to nose contact between horses during the day. Reduce indirect contact spread from people by ensuring you wash your hands between handling different horses and minimise the number of people touching your horse. After the event, make sure all equipment, tack footwear and clothing is washed and disinfected.

At home: make it a policy to keep any new horse to the yard separated from the main herd for at least a two week period. Blood samples are available to screen for exposure to the Strangles bacteria and can be helpful to assess risk. Record the movement of horses coming and going from the yard. It is good practise to use individual equipment for each horse. All equipment should be routinely disinfected on a regular basis. Have a standard protocol in place to use in the event of an outbreak and stick to it!

