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Fall 2006

What are those Coggins Tests anyway?



We all know if you want to go to a horse show, trail ride, or just about anywhere, your horse needs a current Coggins test. But what is a Coggins test? Is it true/false, multiple choice, will I need a number 2 pencil?

The Coggins test was invented in 1970 by Dr. Leroy Coggins of Cornell University to look for antibodies to Equine Infectious Anemia (EIA). EIA, closely related to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), causes fever, depression, loss of appetite and anemia. There is no known cure or vaccine which means testing is our only means of control.

The virus is spread by blood sucking flies. The fly bites an infected horse then flies to the next horse for a second meal taking the virus with it. The newly infected horse will have a sudden onset of severe illness usually followed by recovery to a carrier state. Carriers look and feel perfectly normal but carry the virus allowing it to spread to other horses.

EIA affects only horses, donkeys and mules. The virus acts by attacking the red blood cells directly and the body's ability to store and metabolize the iron necessary to make more cells. This causes the horse to become very anemic and susceptible to other infections. Eventually the horse cannot battle the infections or produce enough red blood cells and must be euthanized.

Prior to widespread testing carrier horses were widespread and caused massive outbreaks across the country. Racetracks and horse shows were perfect areas for the virus to find new hosts. Once a reliable test was available carriers could be identified and kept away from other horse populations.

Skip ahead to 2006. In an average year less than 1% of horses tested for EIA are positive. However, even with widespread testing occasional outbreaks happen, such as the one occurring in Ireland right now. These outbreaks most likely result when an untested carrier horse comes to a horse show, trail ride or other event where Coggins papers are not checked. Natural disasters can also cause these horses to come into contact with other horses.

You can help reduce the incidence with yearly testing of horses that leave your property and testing all others every 2-3 years. Make sure new horses have had a negative Coggins test within 45 days prior to arriving at your farm. Good pest control, especially following natural disasters, can also reduce the spread of EIA.

Please feel free to call us for help planning Coggins testing for your situation.