

# Fact Sheet

# Tetanus

## What is tetanus?

Tetanus is a bacterial disease that can affect most animals. Horses are particularly susceptible because of their environment and tendency to incur injuries. Sadly, infected horses and ponies usually die or require euthanasia.



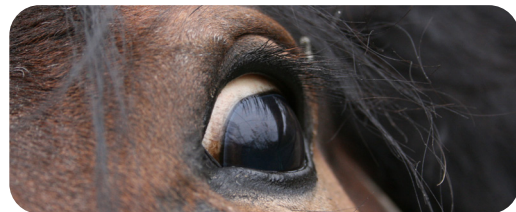
## What causes tetanus?

Tetanus is caused by production of toxins by the bacteria, *Clostridium tetani*. The spores of this bacteria are commonly found in the soil and may be present in horses' faeces and may enter the tissues via wounds. Deep puncture wounds are particularly dangerous as they provide an ideal site for infection as the bacteria thrive in anaerobic (low oxygen) environments. Many tetanus cases have no known history of a wound however.



## What are the symptoms of tetanus?

- Tetanus toxin attacks nerves controlling the muscles of the body. This causes progressively worsening muscular stiffness and spasm. The affected horse will become stiff and have difficulty moving and eating
- The third eyelid (which can be easily seen at the inner corner of the eye) starts to protrude across the eye, particularly if the horse is startled
- The tail is often held out straight
- The horse develops an anxious expression because of facial muscle spasm
- The horse may sweat
- In advanced cases the horse will collapse with spasms, convulsions and death from respiratory failure



## Can tetanus be treated?

- Most cases of tetanus ultimately result in death of the affected animal
- If diagnosed early, treatment is aimed at destroying the bacteria so that no more toxin is produced and reducing the effects of the toxin that has already been produced
- Large doses of antibiotics are used in conjunction with tetanus antitoxin injected usually intravenously and intramuscularly
- If the horse is able to eat, food should be offered at a height where it can easily reach it
- Intravenous fluids and/or catheterization of the bladder may also be necessary
- In severe cases, slinging may be necessary

Unfortunately, the chances of recovery are extremely poor if such measures are necessary and euthanasia on humane grounds is usually more appropriate.

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## Vaccinating against tetanus

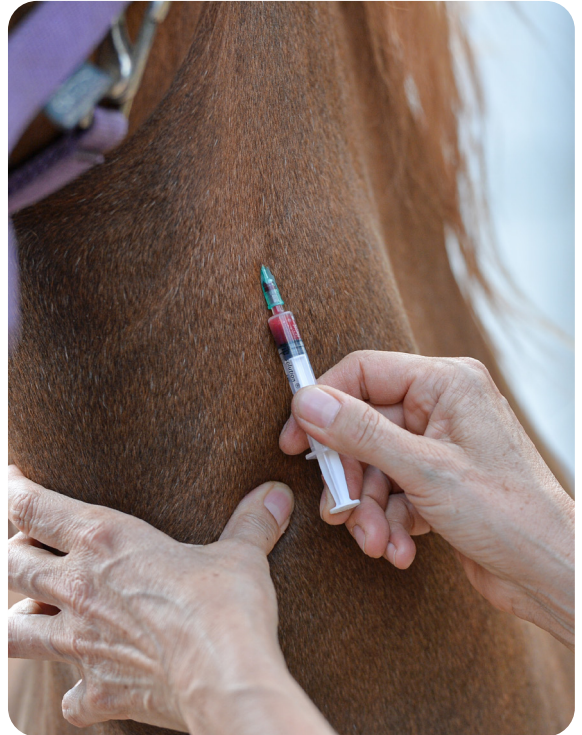
Tetanus is an easily preventable disease by vaccinating every horse.

Effective immunity against tetanus requires a primary course of two vaccinations given 4-6 weeks apart, followed by a booster 12 months later. Thereafter subsequent vaccinations can be given at 2 yearly intervals.

Foals will receive antibodies from their mother's colostrum and milk that will protect them for the first few weeks of life. Many foals are given tetanus anti-toxin shortly after birth as extra protection.

Primary vaccinations are usually started in a horse over the age of 5 months but tetanus vaccination may be recommended in younger animals if the dam is unvaccinated.

Tetanus vaccination is often given as a combination vaccine with equine flu.



## What happens if your horse is not vaccinated?

If your horse has not been vaccinated or their vaccination programme has lapsed and they sustain a wound, it is essential that a tetanus anti-toxin injection is given as soon as possible to prevent tetanus infection. This is not the same as a vaccination but will protect your horse against tetanus for approximately 3 weeks.

It is a very dangerous policy to leave your horse unvaccinated as many tetanus cases occur without any known wound having occurred in the horse.

For further information, please contact your local VetPartners Equine Veterinary Practice on:

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