

## Vaccination Strategies for Horses

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As we begin spring, it is timely to evaluate your horse vaccination program. If you haven't given this much thought, I suggest that you take the time to consult your veterinarian and/or the American Association of Equine Practitioners' (AAEP) website ([www.aaep.org](http://www.aaep.org)). Be sure to check out the AAEP's recently posted recommendations for West Nile virus vaccination of horses.

The concept of vaccination is that by taking a weakened form of a disease-causing agent we can stimulate the immune system of the horse to provide protection against the natural full-blown disease. As is the case with many things in life, vaccination is not 100 percent effective. Many factors can influence the effectiveness of animal vaccination (e.g., stress, poor technique, use of out-dated vaccine, improper storage and handling, etc.). One key point that must be stressed is the need for most initial vaccinations to be followed by a secondary booster four to six weeks later, plus an annual booster. While it may appear that this is only a ploy to increase revenue for vaccine manufacturers, a broad base of research shows that it is clearly needed. In many cases, protective levels of immunity in the animal cannot be reached without a secondary booster. Often times when people report vaccine "failure", it can be associated with improper dosage, administration, vaccine handling, or failure to give booster doses. This tends to lead to word-of-mouth accounts that the vaccine "doesn't work." Make sure that you consult with your veterinarian and research the facts before you take hearsay as truth. Annual boosters are recommended for horses because protective immunity levels decline over time until they fall below the threshold for disease prevention. Given that horses live in environments with greater exposure to pathogens than the average American, annual boosters are vital to preventing highly infectious diseases.

When developing your vaccination program, you should consider the pros and cons of vaccinating for each specific disease. Specific items to be addressed include: Is my horse at risk for exposure to disease X? If my horse gets disease X, what are the consequences (discomfort vs. death, etc.)? What is the cost of the vaccination? What level of protection is provided by the vaccination? Vaccination is often considered "cheap insurance" against fatal diseases, such as sleeping sickness, West Nile, tetanus, etc. However, when designing a health program, vaccination is only one tool. From a management standpoint, limiting your horses' exposure to pathogens is the most complementary tool to vaccination. This can be achieved by minimizing: commingling of newly acquired and resident horses, traffic on and off the farm, stress of susceptible animals, insect populations, and exposure through feeders, water sources, and other inanimate objects. While I hope this snapshot look at vaccination strategies helps, contact your local veterinarian, county Extension agent, or Jason Turner ([jturner@nmsu.edu](mailto:jturner@nmsu.edu)) if you have further questions.