



What Is Equine Herpesvirus?

Equine herpesvirus (EHV) is a family of viruses that can affect horses in various ways, from mild respiratory illness to more severe conditions such as abortion, neurologic disease, and neonatal death. The most common types of EHV in horses are EHV-1 and EHV-4, which typically cause mild respiratory disease but can also lead to abortion and, in rare cases, neurologic disease (equine herpesvirus myeloencephalopathy, or EHM).

EHV is highly contagious and spreads through air particles from nasal discharge, direct contact between horses, and via contaminated equipment, people, or the environment. The virus can also be carried by infected horses that don't show any obvious clinical signs, making containment challenging.



Clinical Signs

The clinical signs of EHV vary depending on the strain of the virus and the individual horse. Respiratory signs include:

- Fever.
- Nasal discharge.
- Coughing.
- Lethargy.
- Loss of appetite.

Signs of the neurologic form of EHV-1 include:

- Ataxia (loss of coordination)
- Weakness, especially in the hind limbs
- Inability to stand.
- Urinary incontinence.

In pregnant mares, abortion, especially in the last trimester of pregnancy, and foal death can occur.

When traveling, horse showing, or introducing new horses onto the property, take horses' temperatures twice daily to monitor for early signs of infection.



Diagnosis

Veterinarians typically use polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing to diagnose EHV in samples such as nasal swabs and blood. This test can identify the virus and help determine which strain is involved.



Treatment and Management

Affected horses require supportive care (e.g., rest, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as Bute and Banamine, fluids). Horses with EHM need more aggressive therapies and antiviral medications. Any horse that tests positive for EHV must be isolated and quarantined until cleared

by the veterinarian. Practice good biosecurity, and disinfect all surfaces and equipment they contact.

Horses with respiratory disease typically recover within one to two weeks. EHM is more difficult for horses to recover from and can result in humane euthanasia or residual neurologic issues. Infected horses carry the virus latently for the rest of their lives, even if they don't show clinical signs. During stressful events, such as travel, they can shed the virus, making EHV challenging to control.



When to Call Your Vet

Call your veterinarian right away if:

- Your horse's EHV signs worsen or fail to improve with treatment.
- A new horse arrives on your property and shows respiratory or neurologic signs.
- A pregnant mare aborts or has a stillbirth.
- You believe your horse might have been exposed to infected horses during an outbreak or at an event where lots of horses have commingled.

Talk to your veterinarian about vaccinating your horses against EHV, particularly if you plan to compete or travel with them. Vaccines are available to help prevent the respiratory and reproductive forms of disease but not the neurologic.