



What Is Pigeon Fever?

Pigeon fever (aka dryland distemper) is caused by the bacterium *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis*. This bacterium is typically found in soil, where it can survive for long periods. It enters the body through cuts, abrasions, or open wounds. It can also be transmitted through contaminated equipment, between horses, or by insects such as flies. The disease is most commonly seen in the Southwestern United States and during dry periods.



Clinical Signs

Pigeon fever presents in three distinct forms:

- **External Abscesses:** This is the most common form of the disease. Horses develop one or more large, swollen, and painful abscesses, typically in the chest, abdomen, or along the limbs. These abscesses can become quite large, sometimes reaching the size of a football. The abscesses might initially appear as soft, fluctuating swellings that eventually rupture and drain pus.
- **Internal Infection:** In rare cases, the infection spreads to internal organs such as the liver, kidney, lungs, or

spleen. Horses might not show visible external signs but could exhibit signs of systemic illness, such as fever, loss of appetite, weight loss, and lethargy. This form of pigeon fever is more serious, with a fatality rate of 30-40%.

- **Ulcerative Lymphangitis:** This form infects the lymphatic system and causes severe swelling, heat, and lameness in one or more legs. It can be chronic in some horses.



Diagnosis

Veterinarians diagnose pigeon fever based on a combination of clinical signs, history, and laboratory tests. They can culture the pus from external abscesses to identify the bacteria. Blood testing can diagnose internal infection. Your veterinarian might also use ultrasound imaging to locate, evaluate, and help aspirate internal and external abscesses.



Treatment and Management

Treatment depends on the form and severity of the disease, but the main goals are to manage the infection, promote healing, and prevent complications.

Your veterinarian might lance and flush external abscesses to allow pus to drain and speed up healing. This process is typically done under local anesthesia to minimize discomfort. Internal infection and ulcerative lymphangitis will require antimicrobial therapy and supportive care.

Keeping the horse's environment clean and preventing the spread of infection is critical. Clean wounds and abscess sites regularly, and disinfect any contaminated equipment, tack, or stalls.



When to Call Your Vet

Call your veterinarian if:

- Signs of pigeon fever worsen or fail to improve with treatment.
- Wounds and abscesses become infected or aren't healing.
- There's a pigeon fever outbreak in your area.
- You believe your horse was exposed to affected horses or contaminated equipment or soil.