

Fear of deadly virus has horse owners sticking close to home

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Horse under quarantine in Dawson County.

Trail rides in the area have been cancelled or postponed as have events at the roping grounds north of town.

Horse owners are worried about a deadly and highly contagious equine herpes virus that has exposed and/or infected horses in 13 states.

Officials say at least seven horses have died or were euthanized which has led to the cancellation of many events involving horses across the nation.

The outbreak of the virus has been traced to an event in Ogden, UT, on May 8 to which horses from Nebraska—including some from Dawson County—competed.

Although state animal epidemiologist Roger Dudley of Gothenburg said there are no known cases in Nebraska, horses in three areas—including one in Dawson County—have been quarantined by the state veterinarian until this Sunday.

Dudley said one is in Scottsbluff and several in Saline County.

If the animals don't show symptoms of the disease by the end of the quarantine period, he said they will be released.

The incubation period for the virus, Dudley said, is about six days.

State veterinarian Dennis Hughes said the virus can cause respiratory disease, abortion in

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mares, neonatal foal death and/or neurologic disease.

Symptoms include fever, decreased coordination, nasal discharge, urine dribbling, loss of tail bone, hind limb weakness, leaning against a wall or fence to maintain balance, lethargy and inability to rise.

While there is no cure, Hughes said symptoms of the disease may be treatable.

In the meantime, both Dudley and Eastside Animal Center veterinarian Ryan O'Hare recommend biosecurity if owners take their horses to places where they will be exposed to other horses.

"It's easiest to think about what we would do to keep from getting a cold," Dudley said. "Don't drink out of the same glasses or sneeze on each other and stay away from sick people."

When traveling to shows or other events, he suggested bringing water from home.

Other suggestions are to wash hands before and after contact with each horse, avoid contact with other horses, disinfect boots and change clothes that come into contact with horses other than one's own.

Finally, state animal health officials recommend the isolation of horses returning from shows for two to three weeks.

O'Hare noted that the equine herpes has been around for a long time with outbreaks happening from time to time.

"Usually the animal is stressed," he said.

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He said his clinic has received calls from a few horse owners with questions about the virus, adding that he doesn't know of any clients at the moment with horses showing symptoms of the disease.

The horses were infected at the National Cutting Horse Association's Western National Championships in Ogden.

Thirty-three confirmed cases have been reported in eight states—California, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah and Washington.

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