



ST DAVID'S EQUINE

FACTSHEET

EQUINE INFECTIOUS ANAEMIA (Swamp Fever)

What Causes This Condition?

Equine Infectious Anaemia (EIA) is caused by a virus that can affect horses, mules or donkeys but has never been endemic in Britain. We have in recent years, however, had horses imported into this country that have been already infected with the disease. The virus is in the Lenti-retrovirus group and is known to be transmitted with the transfer of infected blood by biting horse flies. Flies that are normal in this country can transmit the disease. As the virus has the unique capability of infecting horses for life and there is no cure for it, it is necessary to keep the country free from the disease if at all possible. Legislation was, therefore, introduced in this country to necessitate the slaughter of all Equidae testing positive to the virus. Cases seen in this country have been found to have originated in parts of Europe (or other countries) where the disease is known to occur quite commonly. It is found, for example, in many parts of America, Europe and Asia.

What are the Clinical Signs?

The disease is characterised by a variable incubation period (1 – 8 weeks) followed by acute fever and haemorrhaging. However, these acute symptoms often go undetected and are followed by a chronic phase with episodes of fever, weight loss, depression, progressive weakness, paralysis of the hindquarters, paleness of the mucous membranes with tiny haemorrhage points, rapid breathing and accelerated pulse. Pregnant mares may abort or the virus may be passed across the placental barrier to infect the foetus before birth. Clinical signs are often brought on by the stress of hard work, competition or pregnancy.

How is it Diagnosed?

Diagnosis of the disease is by blood sample (Coggins Test) that shows antibodies to the disease in positive cases. As the virus may remain in the horse for the rest of its life, the policy of eradication by compulsory slaughter is maintained in this country. All imported horses should have a blood sample, before being imported, to indicate their negative status before importation. However, we know from the recently imported case in Northumberland that this does not always occur and the disease first came to light with a blood sample taken by DEFRA whilst the horse was in isolation.

How Can It Be Treated?

There is no known treatment for the disease and, to date, no satisfactory vaccine for EIA. Current legislation requires that horses in this country with proven infection are euthanased to prevent spread of the virus.

Our Advice to Purchasers

As the presence of a positive blood test for EIA will necessitate slaughter of the animal, if you are considering purchasing a horse that has originated in Europe it would be advisable to demand a certified negative Coggins Test (since import) on the horse before completing the purchase. If the horse is still in Europe, demand a certified sample result prior to importation. Otherwise, you will not be sure of the status of the horse and, if the horse is found to be positive on subsequent blood sampling, slaughter of the horse will inevitably result. This is suggested as the movement of horses across Europe and the subsequent import into the UK may occur without all regulations being observed.

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