

Strangles update and information Official Release



January 2026

As most in the Okanagan Valley Equestrian community now know we have the bacterial infectious disease known as strangles here.

We strongly urge as little as possible horse movement. No hauling in for riding. No moving to different stables. No visiting other stables. Go to feed and tack stores at end of day and use different shoes for the barn. Contact your vet and discuss your situation if movement is needed.

Monitor you horses very carefully. If decrease appetite at all or seems less energetic or slightly sleepy take temperature immediately. Contact your veterinarian for direction immediately.

Identification, testing, isolation and treatment is key to resolving this situation as quickly as possible.

Vaccination is available but should not be given to horses that may be fighting off the infection. It will only make it worse.

Currently our practice is involved in three locations, two in West Kelowna and one in Joe Rich area. The location in Joe Rich appears to be very well contained and doing very well. One horse there several weeks ago developed the typical abscesses and has been treated. No other horses on the premises has shown fever or developed abscesses. Soon we will be testing to clear their facility.

Of the two locations in West Kelowna, one is has a low number of horses affected. At that location one horse developed significant nasal discharge and one developed abscesses. Two had fevers that resolved within days. Monitoring and strict biosecurity measures are in place and being followed well. The last location in West Kelowna has the majority of cases with half of the affected horses developing fevers without developing abscesses and the other half developing abscesses.

Strangles is a bacterial disease caused by *Streptococcus equi equi*. It is spread mainly from nose to nose between horses and is very contagious. Humans can spread the bacteria with tack, wheelbarrows, foot traffic etc. Common waterers and feeders are a main source of contamination for horses kept together. The bacteria enters through the nose and infects the associated lymph nodes developing very large abscesses under the jaw, throat latch or around the voice box. The most severe forms can cause the airway to become obstructed and restrict breathing. Death from choking is very rare but possible for this reason. The very young and the very old whose immune system is less strong are the most susceptible.

Once a facility is affected all efforts of containment must be employed to stop the spread. This involves close monitoring of all the horses. Fever, decrease eating and lethargy are the first symptoms. Lumps under and in between the lower jaws and throat latch area may develop within days of that or thick nasal discharge suggesting retropharyngeal abscess rupture (lymph nodes around voice box).

Treatment with antibiotics are not usually advised since that often only suppresses the development of abscesses not fully cure them. Once the antibiotics are stopped the abscesses start developing again. Instead we focus on controlling fever, pain and help the horse's body fight off the infection with good nutrition and immune support. If it appears abscesses are developing we often encourage the development with hot packing the area so that it can develop into a bigger pocket that can be opened by lancing, draining and flushing. This is often the quickest way to get through the infection.

The bacteria is susceptible to most disinfectants therefore, spraying or wiping down potential contaminated areas with a 10% bleach in water solution is effective method of cleaning surfaces. Foot baths are very good but must be changed multiple times daily. Spraying shoes with bleach solution especially the bottoms of shoes is good practice. The bacteria itself is not very hardy outside the body and will die in dry sunny conditions within 24-48 hours. It can survive longer in moist conditions. Ground bacteria is very good at competing with and killing strangles bacteria as well, however, it is still recommended to consider fields with affected horses on it to be contaminated for 3 months to be safe.

Horses can be "carriers" of this bacteria. This means a horse can look completely normal but have the bacteria typically in their guttural pouches (modified large air sacs in their skulls) or sinuses. These horses can intermittently shed bacteria and cause outbreaks to happen. It is important to try to track and identify these horses.

Testing by taking swabs from the nose, back of the nose around the voice box (pharynx) or by squirting saline up to the back of the nose around the voice box and using the captured fluid are standard field procedures. For horses suspected of being carriers a camera is inserted into the guttural pouches to look for infection and then the pouch flushed with saline and testing done on the captured flush.

To clear horses as negative infected testing typically is done three weeks after the last signs of disease. Current recommendations is three negative samples in a row taken one week apart.

The test itself is comprised of cultures (trying to grow the bacteria) and PCR testing. PCR testing is a method which looks for the DNA of the bacteria in the sample and is now considered the best practices standard for confirmation of the bacteria. PCR does not distinguish between dead or living bacteria thus it is combine with culturing to determine living from dead bacteria. Another type of bacteria called *Streptococcus equi zooepidemicus* is a common bacteria found in horses skin and inside noses. Sometimes it can also cause nasal discharge and smaller abscesses under the chin. When sampling we always try to distinguish between the two by PCR.

We have based our recommendations off direct consult with a Equine board certified internal medicine specialist from Antech diagnostics, the AAEP (American Association of Equine Practitioners) guidelines for Strangles and the ACVIM (American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine) Strangles consensus statement.

We have also acquired Point of Care (POC) PCR testing for Strangles and other respiratory diseases which will allow our office to get results within hours of taking samples. This technology from Fluxergy is what is currently being utilized by large show facilities such as Desert International Horse Park, Thermal, CA USA. This technology will allow us to identify and

isolate affected animal much more quickly as well and give peace of mind by testing to ensure animals are not affected as well.