

Keeping Horses Healthy on the Road¹

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Introduction

Every horse owner wants to keep their horses healthy while at home or traveling. The best way to achieve that is to implement biosecurity practices that will reduce disease challenge and increase disease resistance.

What is biosecurity? Biosecurity is defined as measures implemented to prevent the entry of disease-causing agents into populations (Roberts 2014; Weese 2014; Crew, Brennan, and Ireland 2023; Ather and Greene 2005). While horse owners may think basic vaccinations are enough to keep horses healthy, there are several illnesses horses can develop while traveling that are not prevented by vaccination alone. Additionally, travel stress can negatively affect a horse's immune system and reduce its ability to ward off infection (Stull and Rodiek 2000).

When traveling to events and show facilities, your horse may encounter horses of unknown disease status. Even if the horse is up to date on all risk-based and core vaccines, exposure increases the risk of your horse contracting an infection (Figure 1). The infectious agents that commonly cause diseases in horses can be spread by direct contact from one horse to another, through the air via respiratory droplets, or indirectly through shared equipment such as grooming supplies and tack. Thus, it is important to create a biosecurity plan that addresses multiple modes of disease transmission so you can protect your horse on the road (Weese 2014; Crew, Brennan, and Ireland 2023; FEI 2021). This publication reviews the principles of biosecurity as well as best practices for horse owners who want to keep their horses healthy during travel.



Figure 1. UF Potentiallysnippy in her assigned stall during Sale in the Swamp at UF. Events such as sales and shows often bring together horses with unknown health status, increasing the likelihood of disease transmission.

Credit: UF/IFAS Photo by Cat Wofford.

Tips for Keeping Horses Healthy While Traveling

Get Prepared Before You Ever Leave the Farm

Getting your horse ready to travel can be like making sure a child is ready for the first day of school. Are their vaccines up to date? Do they have all the supplies they need? Will they get to their destination on time? It is important not to wait until the last minute. The same goes for traveling with your horse. At least two weeks prior to planned travel, you should double-check that you have everything required for entry at your destination (Crew, Brennan, and Ireland 2023; FEI 2021). Different venues may have different entry requirements, some of which may call for an appointment with your veterinarian. Preparation includes checking regulations well in advance.

All horses need to have a current negative Coggins test, which tests for equine infectious anemia. With a yearly expiration, the Coggins test is often a routine part of your horse's annual wellness exam (Figure 2). Additionally, work with your veterinarian to make sure your horse is up to date on all vaccines before traveling. These will always include the core vaccines, which are recommended for all

horses regardless of age, breed, or use. They may also include risk-based vaccines if your veterinarian determines your horse needs an additional layer of protection against certain infectious diseases. The [American Association of Equine Practitioners \(AAEP\)](#) is an organization focused on the health and welfare of horses, with resources for both veterinarians and owners. It is a great resource for current information on equine vaccines.



Figure 2. Dr. Sally DeNotta (right) teaches students about performing wellness exams on horses.

Credit: UF/IFAS Photo by Tyler Jones.

Some destinations require an official health certificate, which is a form stating a veterinarian has inspected your horse and did not observe any symptoms of disease at the time of the examination (Roberts 2014). The venue entry rules will dictate when the inspection must be performed (i.e., days to weeks before travel). For example, the World Equestrian Center in Ocala, FL, requires a health certificate dated no earlier than 30 days prior to the date of arrival (World Equestrian Center n.d.).

What if there are sick horses at your barn when you are planning to leave for an event? While no one wants to forgo an exciting trip with their horse, situations like these can lead to inadvertent spread of infectious disease. If there are sick horses at your barn, the safest option is to stay home until all horses are free of signs of illness (Roberts 2014; Ather and Greene 2005; FEI 2021). If you are still not sure what to do, contact your veterinarian to discuss the situation and decide on the best plan for keeping your horse, as well as the horses at your destination, healthy.

Know That Horse Trailers and Equipment Can Be Sources of Infection

Just as your hands carry germs, trailers and equipment can harbor pathogens if they have come in contact with

sick horses. This is why it is important to regularly clean and disinfect your trailer and any other washable items such as grooming supplies, stall cleaning tools, water buckets, etc. This is especially important when returning to your home farm because you may be bringing home germs. If you travel frequently, consider keeping a separate set of travel equipment. This means keeping an extra set of brushes, buckets, hay bags, pitchforks, or anything you use routinely while traveling (Weese 2014). Although this equipment is kept separate from your barn items, it should still be cleaned and disinfected between travel locations. This practice helps prevent equipment and tack on the farm from coming in contact with potential pathogens at other facilities (Figure 3).

Be Aware of Your Surroundings While at a Facility

Upon arriving at your destination, park your trailer(s) as far from others as possible. This will allow you to maintain a healthy distance from other horses and help prevent the spread of disease through direct or indirect contact. Avoid allowing your horse to come in direct contact with unfamiliar horses. Do not share feeding or watering equipment with horses from other farms while traveling.



Figure 3. Tack and equipment at UF's Horse Teaching Unit. This equipment does not leave the property and is only used for the live-in horses.

Credit: UF/IFAS.

If you are renting a stall at the event, wash and disinfect the stall prior to bringing your horse and equipment in. Keep a feed or tack stall between your group and others to prevent direct contact through adjacent stall walls (FEI 2021; Lawton et al. 2023).

Want to learn more about how to properly clean and disinfect a horse stall? Check out these [step-by-step instructions](#) (FEI 2021).

Be Extra Vigilant While at Equine Facilities

Dr. Katie Flynn, a biosecurity expert and veterinarian for the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF), recommends specific detergents to prevent the spread of infection. Dr. Flynn recommends the following practices to minimize the chance that your horse will be exposed to

an infectious disease while on a showground or at an event center.



Figure 4. Visitors petting a horse across the gated arena, with a large general prohibition sign over the image.

Credit: UF/IFAS Photo by Cat Wofford.

- **Do take your horse's temperature every morning and night.** Maintaining a temperature log can help you detect illness early. It is also required at many show facilities. If your horse develops a temperature exceeding 101.5°F, call your veterinarian immediately.
- **Do not allow nose-to-nose contact between horses.** You never know where other horses have been or what diseases they may be harboring, regardless of how healthy they appear. Keep your horse from mingling with or contacting other horses to prevent the spread of disease.
- **Do not allow unnecessary visitors.** Visitors have the potential to introduce or spread infectious diseases. By reducing the number of visitors and avoiding contact with other animals such as dogs, you are reducing the risk of disease transmission to your horse (Figure 4).
- **Do not let your horse use a common water trough.** You would not share a drink with an unknown acquaintance, and neither should your horse (Figure 5).
- **Do not allow a shared hose to touch a bucket surface or be fully submerged.** Hoses can be contaminated if they are submerged in a bucket or if they touch the bucket surface. Either bring your own hose or bring some disinfectant to dip a communal hose into before using.
- **Do not use shared pitchforks or muck buckets.** Infectious diseases can be spread by horse manure. Shared pitchforks and muck buckets may have infectious organisms present from previous use. Bringing your own pitchfork and manure bucket helps

reduce the spread of possibly infectious manure into your horse's stall.

- **Do practice good hand hygiene.** Wash or sanitize hands after touching other horses and before touching your own horse. Good hand hygiene reduces disease transmission.
- **Do disinfect and clean equipment and tack between uses.** Sharing equipment is highly discouraged. You should also disinfect your equipment when it is used for different horses, even if they are from the same facility. See below for cleaning and disinfecting instructions.
- **Do keep feed in a sealed container.** A sealed container keeps out wildlife that may be carrying disease.
- **Do not bring extra feed and bedding back home with you.** As you prepare to leave the venue, remember that infectious disease agents can travel home with you. Any leftover feed, hay, or shavings that traveled with you should be discarded.



Figure 5. Multiple horses drinking out of the same water bucket with a submerged hose. A large general prohibition sign is on the image. While sharing is acceptable among familiar herd mates, water or feed buckets should never be shared among unfamiliar horses.

Credit: UF/IFAS Photo by Tyler Jones.

Know How to Get Items Clean

Much like shopping for house cleaning products, it can be hard to know which products you should use on your trailers, stalls, and equipment. For all impermeable equipment, stalls, trailers, and anything contaminated with organic material (e.g., dirt, feces), the use of disinfectants such as Tek-Trol®, Virkon® S, or Intervention® is recommended (FEI 2021; Nadruz et al. 2023; Dwyer 2004).

Dr. Flynn recommends the following four steps for cleaning and disinfecting impermeable surfaces:

1. Remove all organic material.

2. Wash with soap (dish soap is acceptable) and rinse thoroughly.
3. Allow to dry.
4. Apply disinfectant according to the label instructions.

Biosecurity Does Not End When You Return Home

Your trip may be over, but your biosecurity practices should continue to prevent your horse from inadvertently spreading an infectious disease back home. There is an incubation period for most diseases, so a horse can spread illness even if it shows no clinical signs. Thus, the following practices are recommended for horses returning to their home farm (Crew, Brennan, and Ireland 2023):

- Quarantine all returning horses for 14 days in a stall or paddock at least 30 feet away from horses that did not travel (Figure 6).
- Take all quarantined horses' temperatures twice each day and monitor them daily for signs of illness (fever, nasal discharge, cough, diarrhea, etc.).
- Feed and care for isolated horses last. This helps prevent spread of pathogens from isolated horses to non-isolated horses.

Once your horse has completed a 14-day quarantine with no fever and no signs of illness, it may be returned to the normal farm population.



Figure 6. Horse in an isolation enclosure after traveling for an event.
Credit: Lana Katz.

What Do I Do If My Horse Gets Sick Before, During, or After a Show?

If your horse develops a fever (temperature greater than 101.5°F) or any other signs of illness (nasal discharge, coughing, inappetence, colic, diarrhea, etc.), contact a veterinarian immediately. This may be your regular veterinarian, or the veterinarian working at the showground. They will perform a physical examination of your horse and determine if further diagnostic testing or treatment is needed.

The Equine Disease Communication Center (EDCC) has more information about infectious diseases and [alerts about current disease outbreaks](#) in your area. The EDCC also has information on biosecurity in different situations as well as a [video on disinfection](#).

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