

EQUINE INFLUENZA: FAQs

How serious is this strain of equine influenza? Is it likely to prove fatal or is it a mild form?

It is a requirement that all racehorses be vaccinated against flu, as this is an important barrier preventing spread of the virus and will mitigate the impact. However, the presence of the virus in vaccinated horses demonstrates that it's not completely effective against this strain.

The disease may be serious in unvaccinated horses, although symptoms in vaccinated horses are usually mild and transient. Symptoms may include a raised temperature, a cough and nasal discharge, and a horse's performance is affected. It is highly contagious.

What symptoms have appeared in the cases detected yesterday? Are they serious?

They are showing typical signs of mild infection, i.e. nasal discharge, cough, raised temperature. There is nothing to suggest that these particular cases are unusually serious, but implications for the wider horse population and horse movement are potentially serious and we must prevent further spread of the infection as quickly as possible.

Why is this strain affecting vaccinated horses?

The strain of the virus is the "Florida Clade 1" strain, which is endemic to North and South America, and is different from Clade 2 strain that is endemic to Europe.

British horses are vaccinated against both Clade 1 and Clade 2, but this is clearly more virulent than the European strain and therefore able to affect vaccinated horses, though the vaccine will provide some protection. The Animal Health Trust provides more detailed information: <https://www.aht.org.uk/disease-surveillance/equiflunet/equine-influenza-vaccines>.

This is the same strain that wiped out Australian racing for months, is the same going to happen here?

The situation in Australia was very different. The virus is not endemic in Australia and horses were not vaccinated and had no immunity to the virus. As such, we would not expect an outbreak here to be as serious or significant. It is a requirement here in Britain that all racehorses be vaccinated against flu, as this is an important barrier preventing spread of the virus and will mitigate the impact.

What's the treatment for infected horses?

Much the same as for human flu. Rest, and other medications for symptoms as needed. Anyone with concerns about their horse or horses is advised to contact their vet immediately.

How long does the flu last?

In vaccinated horses, typically 24-48 hours, though with performance potentially affected for several days, or sometimes weeks. If a horse is unvaccinated, it can range between 2 – 10 days.

Has the BHA overreacted by abandoning racing?

Equine influenza is a highly infectious disease. It is the most potentially damaging of the respiratory viruses that occur in UK equines. The decision to suspend racing has been supported by Government, National Trainers Federation, Animal Health Trust, and has the unanimous support of the BHA's industry veterinary committee. It would be reckless to allow racing to continue while the extent of the infection is not yet known – this could significantly exacerbate the issue.

Is it true that there are not enough nasal swabs to go round?

The BHA is working closely with the Animal Health Trust in order to manage the logistical challenge of providing sufficient swabs and handling the volume of tests being sent through the facility, considering that testing of a total of 174 yards is now taking place. It will not be possible to test every horse from every yard before the end of the weekend, but we will work with trainers to identify any priority or risk horses and ensure that they are tested. This will all form part of the picture that is built in order to assist the decisions that will be made on Monday.

5,000 extra swabs have been dispatched around the country to facilitate further testing and the BHA's team of Equine Welfare Integrity Officers are assisting in the delivery and collection of samples.

Is there any risk to human health from the equine influenza virus?

There is no known human health risk associated with the virus.

How did the virus arrive in this country and how has it spread?

We are working to identify the most likely source of the outbreak but we have not confirmed this yet, however the indications are that this strain of the disease is one that is prevalent in North America. We expect there is a link between this outbreak and other recent outbreaks elsewhere in Europe.

When did you first know about this strain and what did you do?

We first became aware of the European outbreak in December 2018 and notices were issued by the BHA in relation to this. Trainers were advised to vaccinate any horses which had been vaccinated in the previous six months and were reminded of the appropriate biosecurity precautions.

Should you have taken steps to stop foreign horses coming into the UK or British horses going overseas where they might risk picking up the infection?

This is a wider horse population issue, not a racing specific one. Equine influenza is endemic in the UK. Whilst the racehorse population is vaccinated, and owners of other horses often choose to vaccinate their horses, up to 70% of horses in UK may be unvaccinated. Stopping movement of foreign horses would therefore be unlikely to prevent spread of disease in this country.

Whilst racehorses don't generally mix with other horses in their stables or on racecourses, situations inevitably arise where they may come into contact with unvaccinated horses.

What restrictions on movement are in place now?

Trainers whose horses may have come into contact with affected horses will be contacted and will need to quarantine all horses in the yard. This means that these horses must have no contact with any other equines (e.g. separate lots on gallops, 100 yard) until restrictions are lifted. This is likely to be until samples have been taken from horses and negative test results received.

What steps have you taken since you were notified of the outbreak on Wednesday evening?

The first step was to call off racing. Racing will not resume until Wednesday 13 February at the earliest. We have also stopped some Irish horses from returning home after racing in Britain on 6 February. These horses are now in quarantine. We have put restrictions in place on horses from yards likely to have been in contact with horses from affected yards. Testing of all horses on stopped yards is taking place, funded by the Levy Board.

What's your advice to trainers?

a) If they think their animals may be infected?

B) If they want to protect their animals from infection?

Immediately isolate any animals who may be infected. They should contact their vet as soon as possible to arrange testing. All confirmed case must be reported immediately to the BHA. There is a Code of Practice for dealing with infectious diseases on the website of the National Trainers Federation. [Information and advice on bio-security can be found here.](#)

What should be done about race entries and declarations?

Entries will continue to be accepted from all trainers. If restrictions have not been lifted from a yard by the time declarations are due to be made, the entry will be expunged and no entry stake will be charged. These refunds will be issued manually by Weatherbys therefore any queries in relation to this should be directed to their Racing Finance team.

How should trainers get in touch if they have any concerns?

Their first contact should be with their vet if they have any concerns.

The National Trainers' Federation have an excellent code of practice on their website which documents all the steps trainers should be taking. We are working closely with them.

What is the advice to people working with racehorses?

Everyone should be vigilant and alert to possible clinical signs. They should put increased biosecurity measures in place - as a minimum, hand washing and change of clothes should be required on arrival at any yard. [Further advice on biosecurity can be found here.](#)

What is the advice to owners of other horses not part of the racing industry?

We can't speak on behalf of other equestrian sports or the leisure industry, but the general advice if anyone has any concerns is to contact their vet.

When will the ban on racing be lifted? Might it be lifted partially in some areas of the country?

We have taken the decision that racing will not resume in Britain until Wednesday 13 February at the earliest, including fixtures programmed by the Point-to-Point Authority. A further update will be provided by Monday 11 February at the latest.

Did you have contingency measures in place for dealing with this kind of outbreak?

Yes, these include the measures enacted in the last 24 hours. We will continue to put restrictions on racing and the movement of horses as appropriate.

Have you been in contact with DEFRA/Welsh/Scottish governments? What's their role in managing this outbreak?

While Equine influenza is not a notifiable disease in the UK and therefore not controlled by Government, we will be in touch with Defra to advise them of the situation and the actions being taken.

Could the Cheltenham Festival be under threat?

It is far too early to say.

In general, we would not expect the situation to be as bad as in Australia in 2007, when racing was stopped for an extended period, as British horses are vaccinated and the virus is endemic in

the UK. The situation is very different in Australia where the virus is not endemic and horses are not vaccinated.

How many horses will you swab – and how, when and why?

A vet would take a nasal swab. We will be swabbing all horses from in-contact yards tomorrow, as testing is most reliable 48 hours after likely/possible exposure.

In general, swabs are taken if symptoms are identified. We recommend that owners or trainers immediately contact their vet to arrange this. All swabs for racehorses are paid for by Levy Board funding.

Rumours are circulating that particular yards have been affected. Can you confirm which yards have been affected?

We're not going to identify any specific yard affected, though they may choose to identify themselves.

Of the samples that have been returned so far, three further positive results for equine influenza have been reported, all from the original affected yard. This means that in total six positive tests have been returned from the horses tested so far from this yard. Of the four horses from this yard who competed at fixtures this week, one has returned a positive sample so far – Raise A Spark, who competed at Ayr on 6 February.

No further positive tests have yet been returned from the swabs that have been tested.

We would strongly request media and other members of the public to stay away from any yard they believe to be affected, as this could risk further spread of the flu virus.

If this can be identified through visible signals, should the trainer have identified this her/himself? Could the trainer have done more to prevent the spread in her/his yard?

A cough and nasal discharge are common respiratory signs seen in horses and the majority of cases would not be equine influenza. Under rules, trainers are not required to report these symptoms and therefore movement is not stopped until we are aware there is a confirmed influenza result.