Equine influenza (flu) is a very contagious disease affecting horses. It is caused by the influenza virus, which is a type of virus that infects the respiratory system of birds and mammals. The disease can spread rapidly, and outbreaks can have a significant impact on the horse industry.
**Equine Flu Awareness Month**

THE UK’s first Equine Flu Awareness Month is being launched in April 2016 with the aim of raising awareness, understanding and virus surveillance of this highly contagious evolving disease, say the organisers. The Animal Health Trust (AHT) and Merial Animal Health have joined forces to create the initiative. The AHT’s head of epidemiology and disease surveillance, Dr Richard Newton, believes that the campaign is a significant step in the battle against equine flu.

“The creation of Equine Flu Awareness Month is an important step forward for the equine industry,” he says. “There have been 52 recorded outbreaks of flu in the last two years, and while this may sound considerable, we believe it’s actually just the tip of the iceberg.”

“An flu surveillance scheme at the AHT provides ongoing free sampling to all practices registered to the service, funded by the Horserace Betting Levy Board (HBLB).”

“We are fortunate that the HBLB invests in this important scheme, which also benefits the industry as a whole.”

“We know that approximately just 40% of the total UK herd is vaccinated, so when you consider that all racehorses and many other competing and performance horses are vaccinated under compulsory rules, that leaves the remainder of the herd even less protected and the total percentage well short of the ‘guessedimated’ 70% required to prevent an epidemic,” Richard adds.

“Many horses that don’t travel are still at risk of flu, but frequently go unvaccinated. These animals are not only at risk of contracting and amplifying virus from their stablemates that do travel, but are also at risk of airborne infection as equine flu is capable of travelling over a mile as an aerosol on the wind,” he concludes.

Visit: www.equinefluawarenessmonth.com for more information.

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**Q: WHEN SHOULD I VACCINATE?**

THE exact vaccination procedure differs slightly between vaccine brands, and according to competition requirements.

The timing of the vaccinations must comply precisely with the manufacturer’s recommendations and also, for those horses which are competing, the regulations of the relevant authority (for example the British Horseracing Authority, FEI, British Eventing or British Dressage).

Contact your veterinary surgeon and competition authority for exact details, but broadly a primary course of two vaccinations is required approximately a month apart, followed by booster injections at no more than six- to 12-month intervals depending on specific rules.

Foals are generally first vaccinated from five to six months of age.

**Q: WILL MY HORSE SUFFER ANY SIDE EFFECTS?**

GIVEN that approximately half a million doses of flu vaccine are injected into horses each year in the UK (primary courses and boosters combined), reactions to modern vaccines are extremely uncommon and probably occur in fewer than one in 5,000 vaccination procedures.

Interestingly they appear more common when using combined flu and tetanus vaccines rather than flu-only products.

The most common reactions seen include horses being a bit quiet for a few days after vaccination or a local swelling, stiffness or pain at the vaccination site. Most reactions soon pass with minimal, if any, treatment and reactions needing more involved veterinary care are exceptionally rare.

**Q: ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES TO VACCINATION?**

THE four available flu vaccine products in the UK have all undergone extensive research and clinical trials in addition to extremely rigorous and detailed independent scrutiny by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to establish satisfactory safety and effectiveness. Despite the strong scientific support for the use of these vaccines there may still be some demand from some for homeopathic vaccines (or nosodes). Although these homeopathic products may be supplied from some qualified veterinary surgeons, there is not a shred of evidence that indicates any effect whatsoever in providing protection against flu.

In the absence of such evidence, those who choose to use these products not only put their own horse at unnecessary risk of disease but also endanger other horses that may come into contact with them. H&H

* For further information visit: www.oie.int/doc/D14001. PDF or www.equiflunet.org.uk

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**A persistent and contagious cough is a key sign of the virus, but is not diagnostic**

following changes in just two amino acids (144 and 192) of their “haemagglutinin” (HA) protein, which enables entry of the virus into equine cells.

In 2015 across the UK, five of 22 outbreaks were found to involve this new clade 2 subpopulation. Only one of the four available equine flu vaccine products in the UK contains a Florida clade 2 virus strain, which creates concern of incomplete protection unless further updates are made soon to all vaccine products.

There may be some comfort in the observation that the majority of equine flu cases in the UK have been reported in unvaccinated horses, although inadequately vaccinated horses will also be susceptible.