

# How to beat **strangles**

by Dr Barry Coates



Strangles is an extremely contagious bacterial infection resulting in outbreaks of the disease in horses all over the country. Since humans first relied on horses for work and recreation, Strangles has been a source of owner frustration and animal suffering. Caused by the bacterium *Streptococcus equi*, it is probably the most common equine bacterial infection in the world, which can affect horses of all ages and types.

Strangles can be deadly to horses, but fortunately the mortality rate is seldom more than 1 or 2 in 100 (1-2%). Deaths are usually restricted to very young equines (foals and yearlings). However, it remains a very dangerous and economically important disease for a few significant reasons:

- The disease spreads like wildfire – a very short incubation period is part of the reason that Strangles can reach epidemic proportions within days
- *Streptococcus equi* can survive in the horse's environment for at least 3-4 months, making it very difficult to get rid of once it is on your property
- The disease is highly contagious and infectious and any person, object (tack, brush, etc) or horse that has had contact with an infected horse can easily spread the bacteria to uninfected horses
- Although not that deadly, Strangles still makes horses very sick for a long time, keeping them out of work, racing or pleasure for months (hence the huge financial impact)
- One in five horses that recover from Strangles will become carriers of the disease and spread the infection to other horses without showing signs of the disease themselves.

### What are the clinical signs?

- After an incubation period of 3-6 days the first signs are a thin, clear runny nose (nasal discharge) and perhaps a slight cough
- Then a fever develops (40-41°C) and as a result horses are lethargic, sleepy and go off their food. The nasal discharge becomes thick with yellow pus in the mucous
- After a few days the lymph nodes around the throat, neck and head become swollen, painful and very warm to touch. The horse may be carrying its head stiffly and it may struggle to swallow properly. Sometimes the lymph nodes swell so much that they put pressure on the trachea (windpipe) and the horse may have difficulty breathing (hence the name Strangles)
- These swellings develop into pus filled abscesses after about ten days and then burst a few days thereafter, or they may need to be lanced by your vet. The abscesses can sometimes rupture inwards (meaning into the inside of the horse's throat or nose)
- The mucky discharge from the nose and the pus from the burst



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abscesses contain lots of infective bacteria, ready to infect the stable, yard or pasture and spread the disease

- In about 10% of cases this infection can spread *via* the lymph vessels to lymph nodes elsewhere, such as inside the chest near the lungs. This complication is often fatal and is also known as “Bastard Strangles”
- The above signs would be highly suggestive of Strangles, but to be absolutely certain one would need to culture *S equi* from the pus or nasal discharge. The vet takes a nasal passage swab and sends it to the laboratory for culturing.

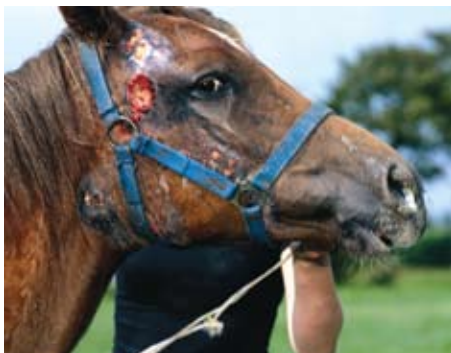
### How is the disease transmitted?

Once inside a stable or yard, Strangles spreads quickly through direct contact between horses or *via* indirect contact such as tack, feed buckets, mangers, water troughs, handlers’ sleeves and hands, blankets and brushes, etc. As a result of the high quantities of infective bacteria in the nasal discharge and pus, which could have ruptured in the horse’s respiratory passages or throat, bacteria can be discharged from their nose when they lower their head to eat or drink. Contact with either the bacteria or the infected animal is necessary to transmit the disease.

### How can Strangles be treated?

If one suspects Strangles, the first thing to do is to isolate the horse/s and close the yard, meaning the suspected infected horse or group of horses must be kept completely separate from the other horses and no one in, no one out. The associated equipment and people should also be quarantined. Your vet should then be called immediately and he/she can then assist you with quarantining suspected Strangles cases. Every property, farm or yard is different and therefore requires individual assessment in terms of controlling an outbreak. Once a quarantine plan is in place and a diagnosis is made or confirmed:

- Ensure affected horse/s are completely isolated from other handlers, animals and equipment
- Let a vet lance unruptured abscesses in an area that can be thoroughly disinfected afterwards
- Use warm packs on the unruptured abscesses to help them “ripen” to ease lancing
- Regularly clean ruptured abscesses and the nostrils and preferably burn the cotton wool or swabs that were used



Full-blown strangles is a terrible sight

- *Streptococcus equi* is very susceptible to penicillin, but it is possible that by treating some horses, one may be dragging out the course of the disease. This is where your vet can help you weigh up the risks of using antibiotics or not
- Ensure that the horse is able to eat and drink depending on how swollen the lymph nodes in the neck and throat are.

### What preventative steps should be taken?

- Infective bacteria continue to be shed from draining abscesses and nasal discharge for about a month
- Affected animals should only be handled by one person and he/she is not to handle any unaffected animals. Tack and equipment must also not be shared
- Disinfect the stable as many times a day as possible. (The bacteria can survive in water for four weeks and on wood and tack for up to eight weeks)
- Treatment areas should be thoroughly disinfected and the cotton wool burned
- Identify carriers by carrying out nasal swabbing (three times at 1-2 weekly intervals)
- **Vaccination** – a vaccine against *Streptococcus equi* is now available. It significantly reduces the likelihood of catching Strangles, and is crucial in massively reducing the severity of the disease. It cannot replace good stable management and close monitoring of one’s horses, but it can help tremendously. Ask your vet to include Equilis Strep-E (Intervet SA) in your horse’s vaccination programme. **SAH**