Equine influenza (EI) virus can cause very similar illness in horses, as we see in humans with influenza. Although, the equine influenza virus is similar to the human influenza virus, it is not the same and is therefore not infectious to people.

One or two days after infection, clinical signs start to show. Fever is usually one of the first signs followed by nasal discharge and coughing. Other signs often seen are loss of appetite and general depression.

Clinical signs resolve in about 7-14 days, although coughing may persist for over three weeks after infection. Often secondary bacterial infections complicate illness and prolong recovery.

EI is a highly contagious disease and in a naïve population morbidity can go up to 100%. Death from EI (mortality) is usually low, although the infection can be fatal in very young foals.

Diagnosis is often based on the characteristic rapid spread of clinical signs of the disease (a whole population could be ill within a couple of days) that includes a dry hacking cough, fever, loss of appetite and nasal discharge. To confirm the diagnosis, nasal swabs can be taken, which need to be sent off to a specialist diagnostic laboratory, like the Animal Health Trust. Here special tests will be performed to differentiate EI from other respiratory pathogens. It is also possible to take paired blood samples and run serological analysis to measure rising antibody levels against the virus.

Treatment of EI is predominantly symptomatic. It is important to make sure an ill animal takes in enough fluids and non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can be given to reduce the fever and make the horse feel better. It is important to monitor patients for pneumonia and as a general rule a horse should have a week’s rest for every day of fever that it suffered, with
It taking several weeks before horses can be returned to their normal work activity.

It is important that new horses should be isolated for up to 4 weeks before introducing them into an existing horse population.

After an episode of EI, a horse will gain immunity against this type of influenza. However, various strains of influenza are circulating. So to protect your horse against these it is better to vaccinate them on a regular basis. This also prevents economic losses caused by an EI outbreak in unvaccinated horses.

Annual re-vaccination usually suffices, but the FEI, who oversee many international equestrian events, currently recommend re-vaccination of competition horses every 6 months (bi-annual).

The Animal Health trust is an OIE reference laboratory for equine influenza virus. We also run an equine influenza surveillance scheme.

This is very important because the influenza virus is very susceptible to mutations and over time EI viruses in vaccines become out of date and less effective in preventing the disease. Through the Trust's surveillance scheme it is possible to keep an eye on what EI strains are circulating among horse populations, so vaccines can be updated if needed and horses will can remain adequately protected.

Sheet compiled by Maud Helwegen, Equine Influenza Research Animal Health Trust Lanwades Park, Kentford, Newmarket, Suffolk CB8 7UU www.aht.org.uk