

IMMUNISED HORSES MAY STILL CONTRACT AFRICAN HORSE SICKNESS IN THE FIELD

The Equine Research Centre sought to determine whether subclinical cases, as well as clinical cases, of African horse sickness (AHS) occur in immunised horses in field conditions in a high risk area. The team used 50 Nooitgedacht ponies resident in open camps at Onderstepoort, where clinical cases of AHS still occur regularly within the herd and prevalence in the area is high. The aim of the study was to follow a herd of systematically vaccinated horses, ranging in age from foals to horses over 20 years old, in an area that is high risk for AHS during the AHS season and establish whether subclinical cases of AHS (in other words whether horses could be infected with AHS virus without showing a single symptom) occurred naturally in field conditions (not experimentally infected).

During the study, over a two year period, 16% of the horses became infected with the AHSV; with half of these (8%) being sub-clinically infected (these horses showed no outward symptoms of disease at all). The recently developed RT-PCR test was used to test the presence of AHSV RNA in the horses. The study showed that horses that have been vaccinated against AHSV can still be infected both clinically and sub-clinically with AHSV in field conditions. The level of the presence of the virus in the bloodstream in the sub-clinically infected horses could be sufficient to infect midges with AHSV.

The potential impact of such cases on the transmission of AHS warrants further investigation. However, the quick diagnosis of both clinical and sub-clinical cases by using the recently developed RT-PCR tests goes a long way to assisting in the control of the disease.

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