



#### Lilydale Clinic

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## Tetanus

Tetanus is a fatal and painful bacterial disease that affects all warm blooded species. Horses are the most susceptible of all species to the tetanus toxin. Thus, it is very important as horse owners to know about this disease and how to prevent it.

Tetanus is a disease caused by the bacterium *Clostridium tetani*. The disease occurs when the bacteria, which are found everywhere in the environment especially in the dirt and faeces, enters a wound. In fact, the wound doesn't need to even be a bad wound, a small puncture wound is just as dangerous. Other possible entry sites are wounds or ulcers in the mouth from dental disease, in mares' uterus post foaling and in a foot abscess. When the bacteria enter the wound, in conditions of low oxygen, the bacteria multiply and produce a neurological toxin. The toxin enters the central nervous system affecting the brain and spinal cord. The toxin inhibits the nerves that relax muscles and therefore there is an oversupply of stimulus to the muscles to contract.

This presents as a horse with uncontrollable muscle contraction. The horse will be very stiff and have a 'sawhorse' stance. The horse may not be able to stand up and may collapse and seizure. Eventually they will not be able to swallow and the face becomes very rigid as well. Ultimately, the poor horse cannot eat or drink and lose the ability to breathe for themselves. This disease is fatal in up to 80-90% of cases.

Treatment for tetanus involves high doses of anti-toxin to bind up any toxin still loose in the bloodstream, antibiotics to kill the bacteria and general nursing care. Helping the horse to feed and toilet is important as well as taking care of any wounds. The original causative wound needs to be cleaned and disinfected, but in some cases it is never identified.

So when it comes to tetanus, prevention is far better than cure! Prevention involves regular vaccination and prompt treatment of wounds by disinfecting them, cleaning them and if in doubt having a vet attend to administer antibiotics. The best thing is to vaccinate your horse against tetanus. The vaccination is highly effective and when administered correctly will prevent your horse from contracting tetanus. The vaccine is a 'toxoid' which means it is not a live vaccine and your horse cannot catch the disease from the vaccine. Side effects to a tetanus vaccine are very uncommon and if occur are no worse than a slight neck swelling where the vaccine was given (most side effects to a 2in1 vaccine occur to the Strangles component).

The primary course for a horse who has never been vaccinated or if you are unsure of vaccination history is 2 injections, given in the muscle, 4 weeks apart, then boosted at yearly intervals. Although humans only need tetanus boosters every few years, as horses are so susceptible to the tetanus toxin they do need more regular boosters.

The vaccination can be given as a 2in1 vaccination combined with a vaccination against the disease strangles.

Please call our clinic for more information.