



POSITIVE CASES OF EHV1 NEUROLOGICAL DISEASE IN LEINSTER AND MUNSTER

31ST May 2018

During the last week the Irish Equine Centre confirmed four cases of equine herpesvirus 1 (EHV1) neurological disease on a Thoroughbred stud farm in Leinster and two cases on a mixed farm (sport horses and Thoroughbreds) in Munster. The owners are implementing the ITBA Code of Practice, voluntary movement restrictions are in place and the horses on both premises are being screened for evidence of virus infection. No EHV1 neurological cases have been confirmed on other premises this year nor has there been a significant increase in respiratory disease or abortion caused by this virus.

Outbreaks of the neurological form of equine herpesvirus 1 are always extremely worrying for the horse industry as they may be associated with fatalities. There is currently an increase in awareness amongst horse owners due to the reporting of cases in France and the USA. However, it is worth remembering that this virus is not exotic. Equine herpesviruses circulate constantly in horse populations worldwide causing respiratory disease, abortion and neurological disease.

Every year equine herpesviruses are confirmed as a cause of abortion and respiratory disease in Ireland but the neurological form is relatively rare. Since 1994 when cases were confirmed on several premises, we have been very fortunate with no more than one or two farms a year affected. The virus is not highly contagious and spread between premises is usually associated with the movement of horses. Containment of the disease depends on rapid diagnosis usually by molecular diagnostics (PCR), and temporary movement restrictions.

Equine herpesvirus disease is not Notifiable but is controlled by implementing a voluntary Code of Practice compiled by the industry. When the neurological form is confirmed, movement onto or from the premises should cease, the horses should be divided into groups and testing carried out to establish the extent of virus spread. Movement of horses should only resume when approved by the attending veterinary surgeon in consultation with the laboratory.

Owners who have any concern in relation to their horses should consult their veterinary surgeon. The neurological form of EHV1 occurs in horses of both genders but mares are most commonly affected. The disease has rarely been observed in foals in Ireland although the foals of affected mares may present with eye infections. The neurological signs range from mild incoordination to paralysis. The most common signs are hind limb incoordination and urinary incontinence. Occasionally a horse may be found recumbent and unable to rise. The disease may be confirmed by PCR testing of nasopharyngeal swabs and blood samples, or brain and spinal cord at autopsy. Sampling materials are available free of charge from the Virology Unit which has significant experience in testing for this disease.

Finally, this outbreak is currently restricted to two premises and the owners should be commended for their willingness to implement the Code of Practice.