

## Your Horse

# HEALTH

## Calendar

DUSTY PERIN



During your horse's yearly physical exam, your veterinarian can draw blood to test for equine infectious anemia, commonly called a Coggins test.

OUR HORSES ARE OUR PARTNERS, OUR FRIENDS, INTEGRAL PARTS OF OUR BUSINESSES, our pets – even our “babies.” We want to keep them healthy so they can do their jobs and because we love them. Regular basic health care can keep them feeling good, as well as give us the chance to catch any health issues early, when they're most treatable.

We asked American Association of Equine Practitioners veterinarian Ben Espy, a board-certified specialist in equine reproduction, infertility and neonatology, about the most important things we can do to keep our horses healthy. While each horse and horse-keeping situation is different, there are a few basic health procedures the majority of horses need.



## Don't miss important health-care intervals to keep your horse feeling his best.

By **Kathy A. Johnson**

CLIX PHOTOGRAPHY



Plan on having farrier work done every six to eight weeks to keep your horse's hooves healthy.

But first, Dr. Espy says, "You have to determine if you have a herd or an individual. A herd is more than two horses. Herd applications are much different than individual applications. If you have an individual, you can vaccinate, deworm or float teeth on any schedule you want. If you have a herd, you're going to have mares foaling at different times, you're going to have mares being bred at different times, you're going to have geldings going away to horse shows and coming home and so on. If you have a herd of 10 or 12 or even 200 horses, you can't treat those horses as individuals. There are lots of vaccination and deworming charts out there that are irrelevant if you have a herd. All of my recommendations, I try to apply to all circumstances. Let me tell you the medical facts, and you decide how you can apply it to your horse herd."

What follows are general guidelines. If you have any specific questions about your horse's health, please consult with the appropriate horse-health expert: a veterinarian for health-care concerns or a farrier for hoof care. He or she should be familiar with your horse and your local geographical area, and can offer individually tailored advice.

### Daily

IF YOU TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN HORSES AND YOUR HERD IS small enough to make it practical, visually inspect them every day. Look over each horse's body, noting any scrapes, swellings or other injuries, and also evaluate his overall expression and attitude. Is he bright and alert? If he is shod, are all shoes still attached tightly?

Being familiar with your horse's usual appearance and attitude will alert you when something is wrong.

Also check feed and water consumption, as well as manure output and consistency, if that's possible.

### Monthly

IN MANY AREAS OF THE UNITED STATES, SUCH AS FLORIDA AND the Southwest, horses should receive a sand-clearing product. This is to keep them from accumulating sand in their intestinal tracts, which can lead to colic. Follow label directions, which usually specify a one-week-a-month dosing schedule.

### Every Six to Eight Weeks

EVERY SIX TO EIGHT WEEKS, MOST HORSES REQUIRE A FARRIER visit for a trim or to have their shoes reset.

### Twice a Year to Four Times per Year

THE CURRENT AAEP RECOMMENDATIONS ARE TO DEWORM WITH ivermectin two to four times a year, or use a rotational program three to four times a year, using ivermectin twice and another anthelmintic the other times.



“The theory is that it decreases the opportunity for parasites to develop resistance,” Dr. Espy says.

While fecal egg counts are often mentioned in conjunction with deworming, Dr. Espy notes that these tests are only useful if the results will change your deworming protocol.

“If you have 800 horses, are you going to do 75 fecal egg counts? And is that going to change the way you deworm your 800 horses?” Dr. Espy asks. “Probably not. If you have two horses, then absolutely do a fecal egg count. The medical principles are the same, but you have to apply them to your circumstances. I’m not saying fecal egg counts are bad, but the reason you do a test is if you are evaluating the effectiveness of your protocol.”



COURTESY OF DR. MICHELLE GARDNER-MCCOSHIN

Dental work should also be part of your horse's yearly exam. However, some horses with bad teeth need more frequent check-ups, and some horse owners – particularly those with very large herds – may selectively decline this service.

## Yearly

ONCE A YEAR, SCHEDULE A GENERAL PHYSICAL EXAM. AT THIS time, your vet can handle a number of procedures, including:

- Testing for equine infectious anemia (Coggins test).
- Examining and floating your horse's teeth.
- Giving core vaccines.

When it comes to floating teeth, Dr. Espy says, “Most teeth are checked once a year, but some horses have bad teeth alignment, and those horses need to be checked every six months.”

On the other hand, he continues, “When you have broodmares or horses that are turned out, many people decide to selectively decline this service. If you have 800, 400 or even 40 horses, the prospect of floating that many teeth is overwhelming, not only from a cost perspective, but also from a workload perspective. Be intelligent and methodical about how you do that.”

Although some stoic horses do not show noticeable signs of dental problems, many do, and the indicators include: dropped feed while eating, head tossing or fighting the bridle, undigested feed particles in manure, loss of body condition, foul odor from the mouth or nostrils, or nasal discharge.

AAEP recommends that all horses receive vaccinations for tetanus, eastern and western encephalitis, West Nile virus and rabies once a year. These are called “core vaccinations.” Many people choose to schedule vaccinations in the spring, before peak mosquito season. In some instances, a fall booster of certain vaccines is recommended for horses at high risk or if there is year-round mosquito activity.

“Depending on the region of the country and the risk factors of the horses, we'll add on additional vaccinations,” Dr. Espy says. These might include equine influenza, equine herpesvirus (rhinopneumonitis or “rhino”), Potomac horse fever, strangles or even snake bite.

“Once again, if you just have one horse, then you'll typically choose the time of the year that is most convenient for you to have your horse vaccinated – maybe the horse is at home, not on the road showing, maybe it's before mosquito season. If my herd includes pregnant mares, then typically my geldings, my stallions and my babies are subservient to the pregnant mares. In other words, the pregnant mares getting vaccinated correctly is going to be the priority, and the geldings are going to get vaccinated at times when it's convenient for me to vaccinate my pregnant mares. Any non-pregnant horse can be vaccinated on any schedule you want. The pregnant mare has specific intervals when she needs to be vaccinated, so I schedule my herd vaccinations around the pregnant female schedule.”

See the full AAEP owner vaccination guidelines at <http://bit.ly/AAEP-guidelines>.

One thing Dr. Espy doesn't recommend? Routinely scheduled sheath cleaning.

“Sheath cleaning is something that humans have invented,” he says. “Millions of geldings are running around that never get their sheaths cleaned that are normal, so I think that sometimes people get fixated on that, and it's not a good use of time or resources. Horses get frustrated, and people get frustrated. The reason horses have smegma on their penis is to protect their penis. So if you use soap to wash it off, all you're doing is removing a protective coating.”

There are a few instances when it might be medically necessary to clean a horse's sheath, such as if the horse has a laceration, or if he has had surgery to remove a cancerous growth, or has a skin condition from equine herpesvirus, for example.



Dr. Ben Espy says the most important thing we can do for our horses is to feed them correctly.



ABIGAIL BOATWRIGHT

See “Why and How Do I Clean My Horse’s Sheath?” by Dr. Espy at [www.aaep.org](http://www.aaep.org).

## More Important Than Health-Care Procedures

DR. ESPY STRESSES THAT THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING WE can do to keep our horses healthy is not a health-care procedure at all, but rather making sure horses in our care receive sound nutrition, especially quality hay.

“Inspect their hay, because forage is the primary food source for a horse, not horse feed or concentrate. Most county extension agents will perform a hay analysis at a low cost or even sometimes for free. It’s really smart that you take advantage of that service. I encourage my clients, when they get new loads of hay or buy new hay at the feed store, to avail themselves of that option. Clearly, the nutrition of any animal is way more important than health care in the sense that poor or inappropriate nutrition is going to kill a horse faster than any disease will. It’s much more likely that a horse dies of colic or because of a dietary problem than a horse gets West Nile virus.”

Dr. Espy has one more suggestion if you have a concern about your horse’s health: “Go to [aaep.org](http://aaep.org). Don’t Google stuff.

“When I started my career, there was no Internet. If you had a question, you asked your horse’s veterinarian. Now, no one even asks me, because it’s available on the Internet.

Sometimes they’re lucky and they find good information, and sometimes they find really, really bad information.”

On [www.aaep.org](http://www.aaep.org), “There are hundreds of articles about different subjects that have all been proofread by four, five or six veterinarians and that are reviewed every three years. There is lots of really sound information,” he says. ■

*AAEP is an AQHA educational marketing alliance partner. Kathy A. Johnson is a freelance writer and Quarter Horse owner from central Florida.*

## Need More Info?



The digital edition of *America's Horse* features a wealth of links, providing more information on many of the health-care topics mentioned in this story. Visit [www.aqha.com/americanhorse](http://www.aqha.com/americanhorse) to access the digital December magazine, with links to AAEP articles and videos from AQHA corporate partners Zoetis and SmartPak. While you're looking at the digital magazine, open the November issue to read a feature story on core vaccinations.