



Preventing Shipping Fever

Q: What can I do to make sure my horse doesn't catch shipping fever?

A: "Shipping fever" isn't one specific disease but rather a syndrome caused by a combination of conditions and illnesses that affect horses being shipped frequently or for long distances. The stress of movement, competition, exposure to new horse populations and their inevitable contagious respiratory diseases all contribute to the syndrome, which can be minimized or prevented with proper vaccination and trailering techniques and vigorous attention to your horse's well-being.

The viral respiratory diseases most frequently involved in shipping fever include equine influenza (horse flu) and the respiratory form of rhinopneumonitis, a herpes disease in horses that causes the common cold. Equine influenza and the rhinopneumonitis are similar to colds and flu in humans, causing fever, depression and loss of appetite and interfering with the horse's ability to exercise. While self-limiting, the damage that they cause can lead to serious consequences. Viral respiratory infections can strip away the protective lining of the respiratory tree and allow bacteria to infect the nasal passages, sinuses, trachea, bronchi and even the horse's lungs. These complications can lead to sinusitis, bronchitis and/or pneumonia and pleuritis, which is life threatening without prompt appropriate medical therapy.

Fortunately, there are excellent vaccines on the market to protect our horses from these occurrences. Influenza and rhinopneumonitis vaccines, available as intramuscular vaccinations requiring a two-shot initial series, provide protection up to four months. Therefore, boosters should be given every three months for uninterrupted protection. Influenza vaccine also comes as an intranasal vaccine and appears to last longer with boosting required at six-months to one-year intervals. Always complete the vaccination series or give the appropriate booster at least three weeks prior to a competition or long haul to allow a full response from the horse's immune system.

Trailering techniques are very important in preventing shipping fever. Stress, dehydration, confinement and head restraint can have a tremendous effect on your horse's health. First consider the length of the haul. Every hour of active trailering is the equivalent of an hour of walking since the horse is constantly balancing and shifting to accommodate the trailer's movements. Therefore, don't haul a horse any longer than he is physically fit to walk. Typically, for a healthy sound horse, trips in excess of 14 to 18 hours require an overnight rest, preferably off the trailer. Horses should have short rest stops every four hours and be allowed to have access to water and lower their heads, which allows them to blow their noses and cough up much of the mucous congestion that has accumulated in their respiratory tract. In nature a horse spends 14 to 18 hours per day with his head down grazing, a position that allows the mucous cleansing mechanism to function best. But in a trailer the horse's head is restrained in an upright position, usually with road dirt and hay chaff blowing in his face. In addition most trailers have either poor ventilation with increased temperatures (windows and vents closed) or blowing air with potentially chilling conditions (windows and vents open).

Although most horses will refuse water the first four hours of a trip, the majority will start accepting the offer at subsequent stops. Horses that are reluctant to drink water on long hauls, or are prone to colic,

ARABIAN HORSE ASSOCIATIONSM

10805 East Bethany Drive | Phone 303-696-4500
Aurora, Colorado 80014 | Fax 303-696-4599
www.ArabianHorses.org | info@ArabianHorses.org



should receive oral electrolytes (salt) and/or mineral oil and banamine prior to traveling. This can help stimulate thirst, prevent impaction of food in the intestinal tract and maintain physical comfort. Allowing horses to eat good quality hay during the haul provides a constant level of food in the gastrointestinal tract and will maintain regular bowel movements if they continue to drink water.

At every rest stop, the horse's skin temperature should be monitored by feeling the skin over the neck, behind the elbow and on the flank. Blankets and sheets can be removed or added and windows and vents adjusted to optimize the comfort level. Trailer floors should provide good traction and be well bedded for shock absorption and ease of manure and urine removal.

Remember that horses inside the trailer are riding blind. They cannot anticipate the movements that they must negotiate in order to prevent stumbling or falling so drivers should avoid fast starts, abrupt stops and high speed curves.

At the end of a trip, promptly unload the horses and allow them to lower their heads. Provide water and a well-bedded loose stall, where horses will usually roll. Horses that have had multiple, long or stressful trips should be monitored closely for water consumption, appetite, manure production, attitude and rectal temperature (normal is 100 to 101.5 degrees F). Promptly relay any concerns to an equine veterinarian for evaluation.

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