



Alabama A&M and
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Equine Science

TIMELY INFORMATION

AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

EXTENSION ANIMAL SCIENCE, UPCHURCH HALL, AUBURN UNIVERSITY, AL 36849-5625

PIGEON FEVER OUTBREAK (H48-0512)

Cindy McCall, Ph.D., Extension Horse Specialist

There are several confirmed reports of pigeon fever in horses in Okaloosa and Walton counties (northwest Florida bordering Alabama). If you have never heard of this disease, it is because it is usually found in the western United States. However dry weather and high temperatures have made conditions favorable for transmission of the disease in the southeast. The disease is also called “dryland distemper” which reflects its prevalence in dry regions of the country.

Pigeons have nothing to do with spreading the disease. This name is from the typical swelling of the horse’s chest in the most common form of the disease, so that it resembles a pigeon’s breast. Pigeon fever is caused by an organism living in the soil, *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis*, and can affect cattle, sheep and goats, as well as horses. However cross species transmission is not common. The disease in horses can take three forms. External abscess of the horse’s chest or belly is the most common form. Horses with this form of the disease may have a fever, but often do not show any signs of illness other than the swelling and abscess. A second form is internal infection in which the horse has decreased appetite, fever, lethargy, weight loss, respiratory disease or colicky signs along with abscesses. The least common form is ulcerative lymphangitis which causes swelling of the legs, cellulitis (skin infections) and draining tracts along the horse’s lymphatic system. These horses may be severely lame, off feed and lethargic and may have a fever.

The bacterium causing the disease is thought to enter the horse’s body through skin wounds or mucous membranes. Flies can spread the disease between horses, and it can be spread by horse to horse contact or horse contact with humans or equipment carrying the bacteria. To reduce the spread of the disease, control flies. Use fly sprays on both affected and unaffected horses. Consider a feed-through fly control product, fly traps or fly predators to help control flies. Do not share equipment between horses and properly dispose of any contaminated bedding from sick horses. Always care for sick horses after you have cared for healthy ones. Scrub up, change your clothes, and disinfect or change your footwear between sick and healthy horses. No confirmed cases of *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis* transmission from horses to humans have been reported; however, always take precaution if pigeon fever is suspected because people have been known, on rare occasion, to contract the organism from other animals. Be sure to wear gloves and always wash your hands after dealing with any animal infected with *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis*.

If you do suspect your horse has pigeon fever, contact your veterinarian and follow his/her advice for handling the abscesses and caring for your horse. There is no vaccine for the disease, so concentrate on prevention and good nursing care if your horse gets pigeon fever.

For more information about pigeon fever in horses go to:

http://www.aaep.org/health_articles_view.php?id=360

http://www.aaep.org/health_articles_view.php?id=358

<http://okaloosa.ifas.ufl.edu/ag/>