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FAST FACTS ABOUT
EQUINE PROTOZOAL MYELOENCEPHALITIS
(EPM)

DEFINITION

EPM IS A DEBILITATING DISEASE THAT RESULTS IN WEAKNESS, INCOORDINATION, SPASTICITY, AND MAY BE FATAL. IT IS CONSIDERED THE #1 CAUSE OF NEUROLOGIC PROBLEMS IN HORSES TODAY.

CAUSE

THIS DISORDER IS CAUSED BY THE PROTOZOA *SARCOCYTIS NEURONA*. THE PROTOZOA ARE SPREAD BY OPOSSUMS THAT ACQUIRE THEM FROM INFECTED BIRDS. INFECTIVE STAGES OF THE ORGANISM ARE PASSED IN AN OPOSSUM'S FECES THAT THE HORSE COMES IN CONTACT WITH WHEN EATING CONTAMINATED FEED OR WATER.

CLINICAL SIGNS

IT TAKES A MINIMUM OF 4 WEEKS AND MAY REQUIRE YEARS FOR CLINICAL SIGNS TO DEVELOP. IT MAY ONLY BE SEEN WHEN ANIMAL IS UNDER STRESS. SIGNS WHICH CAN VARY FROM MILD TO SEVERE INCLUDE ABNORMAL GAIT, INCOORDINATION, WEAKNESS, MUSCLE ATROPHY, FATIGUE, SEIZURES, ABNORMAL SWEATING AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGES.

DIAGNOSIS

THE CLINICAL SIGNS CAN BE USED TO BASE THE DIAGNOSIS UPON. BLOOD (USUALLY INCONCLUSIVE) AND CEREBROSPINAL FLUID CAN BE ANALYZED. TRIAL AND ERROR METHOD NOTING ANY RESPONSE TO TREATMENT IN THE FIRST 10-14 DAYS.

TREATMENT

GOALS OF TREATMENT INCLUDE ELIMINATING THE PARASITE (USING ANTI-PROTOZOAL DRUGS), REDUCING INFLAMMATION (NONSTEROIDAL ANTI-INFLAMMATORY DRUGS), AND TREATING ANY SECONDARY COMPLICATIONS

PROGNOSIS

IF DIAGNOSED EARLY, RECOVERY TO NORMAL USUALLY OCCURS IN 50-70% OF HORSES. RESPONSE IN FIRST 10-14 DAYS OF TREATMENT IS A GOOD INDICATOR IN THE PROGNOSIS. THOSE DIAGNOSED EARLY AND MILDLY AFFECTED ARE MORE LIKELY TO RETURN TO NORMAL.

PREVENTION

PREVENT ACCESS OF OPOSSUMS TO FEED, HAY, AND WATER. TRAP OPOSSUMS. KEEP STABLE AND FEED AREAS CLEAN. SEAL FEEDS IN CONTAINERS. DO NOT FEED GRAIN SWEEPED FROM FLOOR. FEED HEAT-TREATED CEREAL GRAINS.

VACCINATION

A VACCINE, THE EFFICACY OF WHICH IS STILL BEING ANALYZED, HAS RECENTLY (2001) BECOME AVAILABLE. INITIAL VACCINATION CONSISTS OF 2 INJECTIONS, FOLLOWED BY AN ANNUAL BOOSTER.

-Dr. Lyda W. Denney-