

ARMED FOR SUCCESS

Implement these strategies to keep your horse healthy, strong, and ready to compete through the busy fall months of championship season.

Article and Photos by *Kaycie Timm*



Bolster your horse's immune system with the support he needs to keep illness at bay as you load up for championship season.

You've worked all year, through spring rain and summer heat, and your horse is ready. He's mastered his lead change, he nails every stop, and he shuts off his spins instantaneously. You arrive at the first show of the fall championship season anticipating victory. Then, the unthinkable happens: You find your horse in his stall with his head hanging, his nose running, and signs of fever. He's sick—and you have to scratch. →



Before your horse settles in his stall at a show, spray the area with disinfectant; place mats on the floor; and spread clean, dry shavings.

Whether you're showing at a major aged event, a world show, or a regional competition, don't let that story be yours this championship season. Instead, set your horse up for success with these strategies to keep him at the top of his game.

Preparation Equals Protection

Attending show after show at facilities across the nation increases your horse's risk of getting sick. He's surrounded by germs from other horses, his immune system can be weakened by stress and travel, and he must perform at a high physical

capacity in the arena. Keeping your horse healthy despite all these factors requires arming him to fight off the illnesses he'll be exposed to on the road and at shows. First, you'll need to work with your veterinarian to develop a vaccination program that suits your horse's needs. That way, he's prepared to battle harmful diseases before he even steps onto the trailer.

"Making sure your horse is immunized for the diseases that are prevalent at horse shows and events is the first layer of protection," notes Joe Carter, DVM, owner and founder of Oklahoma Equine Hospital.

"When a horse goes to big arenas that are holding events every weekend, you can't help but expose him to flu, rhinopneumonitis, and other common respiratory diseases. He needs to be thoroughly vaccinated to reduce that exposure."

Carter emphasizes the importance of frequent flu and rhino vaccines, since those two diseases are the most common threats to show horses, in addition to your veterinarian's specific recommendations. Routine protection against tetanus, sleeping sickness, and West Nile virus is also a necessity. When available, opting for an intranasal vaccine adds the benefit of local protection in the back of the throat and nasal passage not provided by a standard intramuscular shot. Carter also suggests administering the strangles vaccination, even for aged horses, noting that this disease is more prevalent than horse owners may realize.

"It's not always a classic case of strangles where the horse gets an abscess under his jaw that breaks and drains," Carter explains. "Horses might have some partial immunity from previous exposure or a vaccination program earlier in their lives, but if they haven't had a booster, they might get a low-grade case. This can result in symptoms as simple as a snotty nose and a fever."

Although the illness may not appear severe, it stems from the same bacteria as a harsher strangles infection, so the standard strangles vaccine and boosters serve as preventative measures.

Another key layer of biosecurity takes place once you arrive at the show. While vaccinations protect your horse from the inside of his

body, spraying your stalls with disinfectant can provide external protection by eliminating any lingering germs. A thorough misting with disinfectant can help your horse stay away from illness, so it's well worth the extra step in your set-up process. NRHA Professional Matthew Palmer suggests taking that safeguard one step further by ensuring your horse's stall also has clean mats under the bedding.

"No matter if I'm at home or at a show, I always make sure my stalls are matted and disinfected," Palmer says. While this extra measure—and the additional cost—might seem unnecessary, keeping your horse healthy and comfortable will help him perform at his best.

Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise

Getting a jump on any potential issues before they develop into performance-hindering problems makes your busy fall show season more successful and less stressful.

"Scheduling a routine wellness exam and soundness check with your veterinarian prior to major events is very important in allowing your horse to compete at the highest level," Carter shares.

While it's especially vital for young horses to have check-ups every few months, reiners of all ages will benefit from regular vet visits. According to Carter, the show-pen penalties you might attribute to training or attitude issues could stem from low-grade lameness and soreness. For example, a horse with soreness in his shoulders might consistently get a minus on his spins. You may think you need to spend more time turning, when in fact your horse needs medical



Providing adequate water and using electrolytes to encourage your horse to drink will ward off dehydration, which can be detrimental to your horse's performance.

attention so he can show off his skills pain-free. The same is true for other body parts and different maneuvers.

"The classic soreness that produces a training issue in a reining horse is sore hocks," Carter discloses. "When a horse's hocks get sore, they quit stopping."

During a wellness exam, a simple flexion test will reveal underlying soreness that you might not be able to feel while you're riding. Once you're aware of the beginning of a problem, you can move forward

with an appropriate management strategy—such as joint therapy, targeted supplements, or chiropractic work—so your horse can continue competing at his best.

"When I started doing wellness exams for all my horses, I saw a big change in my horses' successes," Palmer shares. "My horses feel a lot better and a lot stronger because I have a better idea of how each horse feels."

Not only will routine exams keep you aware of potential problems before they arise, it also helps your horse be more comfortable with the veterinarian. That way, your vet knows your horse well enough to detect potential issues and your horse will already trust your veterinarian if an emergency arises.

"I let my veterinarians place their hands on our horses by doing flexions and soundness exams at least once a month," NRHA Professional and Four Million Dollar Rider Craig Schmearsal reveals. "That way, they have a good rapport with the horse, and if something goes bad, they can get a jump on it."

The necessary frequency of exams for your horse depends on his age, medical history, and performance intensity. Work with your veterinarian to determine what best serves your horse so you can hit the road with confidence this championship season.

Hauling Hazards

Traveling for days at a time to reach major events like the NRHA Futurity in Oklahoma or the All American Quarter Horse Congress in Ohio takes its toll on riders, but especially on horses. →



Digestive support such as pre- and probiotics might be necessary to prevent ulcers and other internal issues caused by the stress of long hauls.

“They’ve got to be hydrated,” Carter asserts. “Additional fluids are necessary to keep horses on track when they’re hauled across the country.”

Giving your horse electrolytes, either with feed, in his water, or as a paste, can provide the boost he needs to cause him to drink enough to stay hydrated on the road. If you opt for powdered electrolytes, a flavored variety can maintain consistent taste in the water.

“Some horses don’t like the flavor of water at different facilities,” Carter says. “If you use the same additive at home, on the road, and at shows, it’s a good way to keep your horse drinking.”

Headquartered in Elverson, Pennsylvania, Palmer understands the inherent risk of hauling long distances to shows halfway across the country, and he’s developed his own strategy to keep his horses healthy on the trailer.

“When I leave for one of the big shows, I always give electrolytes starting about four days before we pull out of the driveway, even if it’s not hot,” Palmer shares. “My trailers are built so we can pull down the back doors to check the horses’ temperatures before we get to the show. I keep feeding electrolytes and checking temps until after we get there to make sure their temperatures stay consistent.”

Schmersal also relies on the benefits of electrolytes, and takes an additional precaution to keep his horses hydrated while hauling to and from his ranch in Scottsdale, Arizona.

“We make sure the horses get electrolytes 12 and 24 hours before we leave so they start out good and hydrated,” Schmersal says. “We also keep a bucket of water and fresh hay in the trailer with our horses. It’s very important to be on top of that stuff, because they’ve got to stay hydrated to prevent sickness.”

It’s also important to consider if your horse needs additional digestive support such as a pre- and probiotic booster, which is often available in paste form. By combining pre- and probiotics with mannanoligosaccharides, yeast cultures, betaglycans, and antioxidants, this type of supplement helps the microflora in your horse’s digestive tract function at its best, despite the stress of hauling.

“Anytime you hit the road with a horse, it takes a big toll mentally and on the digestive tract,” says Jyme Nichols, PhD, PAS, who serves as the Director of Nutrition for NRHA Corporate Partner Bluebonnet Feeds. “Horses perform better on the road when you have them on an oral plasma supplement and a really good probiotic. These can help prevent colic and diarrhea, and also keep your horse more mentally stable and relaxed.”

Proper digestive care can also help prevent stomach ulcers, which commonly develop due to the stress of travel. In addition to wreaking internal havoc, ulcers can cause your horse to stop eating and lose body condition. To lessen the chance of ulcer development—and keep your horse enjoying his daily grub—consider using an ulcer preventative, like omeprazole, before you head out on the road.

Supplemental Suggestions

Once you arrive at a major event, your horse needs to be at the top of his game. However, stress can reveal holes in a horse’s diet. Rather than find your horse lacking in the heat of show season, Nichols suggests adding a few key supplements to your horse’s feed program year-round.

“Horses need consistency,” Nichols asserts. “Once you put them on a good program, keep them on that program.”

One common missing link is trace mineral and vitamin supplementation. Lacking these nutritional sources can cause your horse to tire quickly, lead to hoof and joint issues, and make him more susceptible to injury—nothing you want to encounter when you’re hauling for a major title or to a big-money event.

“You want to build the horse from the inside out,” Nichols reveals. “What’s happening on the inside is what’s really going to matter for high-end performance.”

Nichols suggests implementing an oral plasma supplement into your horse’s diet to aid with respiratory and stomach-related issues and improve joint range of motion. Another supplement worth considering is yucca, which protects your horse against the danger of excess urine at facilities with lots of horses stalled in the same area.

“Ammonia levels can increase at a show, especially when your horse is there for an extended period of time, and that can be really damaging for the respiratory system,” she explains. “When you get to the end of a show and your horse doesn’t have his normal air capacity, it could be the caustic ammonia affecting his lungs.”

Feeding yucca as a respiratory aid can prevent this hindrance to your horse’s performance. As you develop a supplement plan specifically for your horse, keep in mind that equine athletes need support to function at their best and perform in the arena, just like their riders.

“I relate it to humans: When we’re not feeling good, we don’t ride well,” Palmer explains. “Our horses can’t tell us what’s wrong, and using supplements eliminates a lot of issues before they become problems.”

Implementing special physical care into your horse’s regular routine can also help by giving him an extra boost.

“Before and after major shows, I have a chiropractor and an acupuncturist come work on my horses,” Palmer shares. “I also use Magna Wave therapy and give each horse a liniment or Epson salt bath.”

As you develop a routine that’s ideal for your horse, with the counsel of your veterinarian and trusted professionals, find confidence in knowing you’ve prepared your horse as best as possible for this championship season.

“Believe in your program,” Palmer encourages. “Trust in what you’ve done and know your horse will feel a lot stronger and healthier because of it.” ❖



Show grounds are a danger zone of disease. Providing adequate nutritional support year-round will help your horse stay healthy despite the exposure to germs and stress.

He’s Sick! Now What?

If your horse contracts an illness while at a show, use these steps to help him recover quickly and prevent the sickness from spreading to other horses.

1. Contact the show veterinarian. He’ll need to examine your horse to make an accurate diagnosis.
2. Allow the vet to rule out noninfectious diseases or allergies, which can be caused by a reaction to arena dust or ammonia in the stall area.
3. If your horse is contagious, follow the veterinarian’s recommendation for treatment and quarantine, if necessary.
4. Be aware that severe illness, such as shipping fever, might require extended treatment or even hospitalization before you can take your horse back home.