

# Equine flu – why don't owners vaccinate their horses?

July 29 2016, by Emma Thorne

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Credit: University of Nottingham

A research project led by a student at The University of Nottingham is aiming to uncover why some horse owners choose not to vaccinate their animals against a potentially-fatal illness.

Equine flu – or horse flu – is endemic in the UK which means that at some point in their lifetime most horses will come into contact with the virus, which can leave the animals open to more severe secondary infections leading to pneumonia or even death.

Around 85 per cent of all horses in the UK need to be vaccinated to protect the national herd stock. However, evidence from recent outbreaks suggest that some owners are failing to adequately protect their pets.

Will Bambra, an undergraduate student in the University's School of

Veterinary Medicine and Science, is leading a [research project](#) as part of his degree course which is aimed at improving our understanding of why some owners decide against vaccination.

He is asking owners to anonymously complete [a short online survey](#) featuring a number of questions exploring the factors that would have a bearing on their decision to vaccinate their animals as well as assessing their understanding of the impact of equine flu.

Will said: "In the UK, equine flu is quite a severe disease and when outbreaks do occur they can have a serious impact on horse communities. If [vaccination rates](#) fall below the 85 per cent mark, it increases the chances of widespread infection."

Horse flu is caused by various strains of the influenza flu, similar to the [flu virus](#) that affects people. As with the human version, equine flu is very contagious.

It causes a raised temperature lasting up to ten days, a harsh, dry cough that can persist for several weeks, clear or white discharge from the nose, enlarged lymph nodes in their throat, depression and loss of appetite.

Horses affected by equine flu should be given complete rest and ideally not strenuously exercised until at least two weeks after they have made a full recovery.

In horses with a compromised immune system – which may be due to age, stress, illness or over exercise – severe secondary infection can occur. These cases are characterised by a thick yellow or green nasal discharge and a very high temperature and can lead to pneumonia or in severe cases can be fatal.

Vaccination, followed by an annual booster – which can cost in the region of £40 to £60 - offers protection to horses from the disease. Vaccination for racing and some competitions is compulsory. However, for [horses](#) which are companion animals or used for leisure riding, it is entirely the owners' choice whether to immunise their animal.

William added: "We are interested in assessing which factors are influencing owners when making their decision. Is it the financial outlay which is having an impact or could it be that the owners' perception is that the illness is not a serious risk to their animal's wellbeing?"

As part of his research, William is also conducting an analysis of the results of previous studies into horse flu in order to identify any trends in the data.

Horse [owners](#) are urged to assist with the research by completing the [online survey](#) which will be live until October.

Provided by University of Nottingham

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