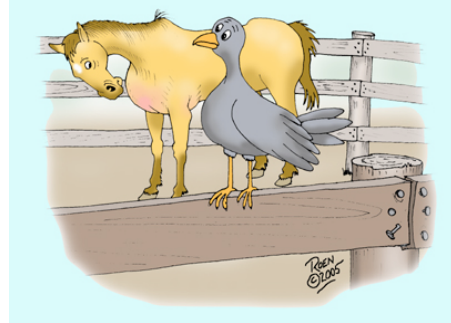


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## Pigeon Fever

“Pigeon Fever” is a disease that horse owners in Central California should be aware of. While pigeons have nothing to do with the , the disease can cause abscesses and dramatic swelling in the pectoral region of the horse, making the horse’s chest resemble the chest of a pigeon and giving the disease its nickname. Other names for the disease include “Dryland Distemper”, “Pigeon Breast Fever”, “Dryland Strangles”, and *Corynebacterium Pseudotuberculosis*.

This disease is caused by a bacteria that can survive for long periods of time in the soil. It is thought to be transmitted to horses by flies. The bacteria is likely to penetrate the skin through abrasions or small wounds.. Flies feeding on these areas can plant the bacteria which then proliferates in these warm, moist environments. Although seen throughout the Southern United States, California is particularly well known for having a high incidence of this disease, especially during the late summer and early fall. The more arid parts of our state are hit harder by pigeon fever. Some years the prevalence seems to be much higher than other years.



The typical signs include abscesses anywhere along the ventral midline including the chest, sheath/mammary glands, or in small chains along the lymphatic channel of a leg. Large plaques of ventral edema are also frequently present adjacent to the abscesses (ventral edema causes sponge like swelling on the underbelly of horses). Rarely, it can cause an internal abscess as well (less than 3% of all cases). Fever, weight loss, depression and lameness may also occur in some combination along the abscesses. Pigeon fever abscesses usually take several weeks to mature, open and drain, but occasionally the infection may be long-lasting and occur for over a year. Once the abscess matures and the condition resolves, over 90% of horses will remain immune to the disease in the future. In those rare instances where the disease recurs, it is unknown whether recurrence is due to re-infection or relapse of the original disease.

Pigeon fever should be considered at the top of the differential list in any horse that has an abscess in a typical location. The diagnosis can be confirmed by culturing fluid taken from an abscess and identifying the bacteria. If a positive culture is not obtained or if your veterinarian suspects an internal abscess, there is also a blood test that can be performed to help rule in or rule out the disease.

This blood test is performed at the University of California at Davis and is very affordable.

Treatment of the disease may be different in various cases depending on the severity and the body systems involved. Draining the abscess is the mainstay of treatment but should not be performed until the abscess is mature. If done prematurely, the abscess is more likely to recur. How mature an abscess is can be assessed by palpation (they generally get soft in the middle when they are mature) and by ultrasound. Ultrasound is also helpful in determining if there are multiple pockets of fluid and in identifying deep abscesses. Once opened, the abscess cavity should remain open and it should be flushed daily with an antiseptic solution like betadine or nolvasan. Most horses will be completely over the disease within 3 weeks of the abscess being drained. Use of antibiotics is controversial. Many veterinarians recommend against administering antibiotics for external abscesses because of the potential to delay abscess maturation. However, in cases involving internal abscesses or involving the lymph channels of a leg ("Lymphangitis"), long-term antibiotics are generally prescribed. While horses affected with external abscesses have an excellent prognosis, internal abscesses are fatal in 40% of the cases

Prevention is centered on good sanitation practices and fly control. Quarantine of affected individuals is not generally recommended due to the long distances that insects carrying the bacteria can travel. Practicing good fly control can help reduce other diseases as well. We use a spray system and "fly predators" as well as daily manure evacuation at our hospital to accomplish this. In a pasture setting, daily feeding of a small scoop of a new product called "Solitude IGR" made by Pfizer is thought to dramatically reduce fly populations. There is also currently research being performed attempting to make a vaccine against this disease.

Tim G. Eastman DVM, DACVS, MPVM was raised in Monterey County California where his family had deep roots in the local horse industry. Like many veterinarians, he decided to become an equine veterinarian at a very young age. He obtained a degree in Animal Science at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and a business minor. He also obtained a doctorate in Veterinary Medicine from the University of California at Davis in 1996' as well as a Master's Degree in Preventative Veterinary Medicine. He performed a one year internship at Littleton Large Animal Clinic in Littleton Colorado and then a 3 year surgical residency at Texas A&M University in College Station Texas . He met his wife, Alexandra (Alex) in veterinary school and got married during his surgical residency. They now work together as co-owners of Steinbeck Country Equine Clinic in Salinas California.