

West Nile Virus

What is the cause?

A Virus in the same family of viruses that cause Yellow Fever and Dengue Fever

How is it Spread?

The disease is mainly a disease of birds, and it is spread from bird to bird by midges. Infected midges that bite humans, horses, cats, dogs, bats, squirrels and rabbits can infect those animals with the virus. All the species other than birds are thought to be "dead-end-hosts" which means they don't pass the virus on.

The midges that carry the disease are the same family of midge that cause sweet-itch in horses.

What are the signs of disease in the Horse?

Many horses infected with the virus show no or minimal signs, 70% show no signs, 20% show mild signs such as fever, weakness, sore muscles or ataxia (wobbly gait).

Only in 1-10% of infected horses show severe signs which are mainly associated with profound dysfunction of the hindlimbs, paralysis, inco-ordination, upto 60% of these horses may die.

How is the disease diagnosed?

A simple blood test is used to look for antibodies to the virus in the blood. This, in combination with the clinical signs allows a diagnosis to be made.

How can we prevent the disease?

Since the U.K. is currently free of the disease, blood testing horses before they are imported is the best way. However, the disease could be brought into the country by infected birds. The disease has spread across the USA over recent years.

There are two vaccines available but not yet licensed for use in the U.K. but should the disease become a problem in the country, then we would be able to vaccinate to help protect our horses.