

Is Your Horse on a Good Wellness Plan?

By Kendra McLeod, DVM, CVA

A wellness exam is very important to make sure your horse is on the right schedule for his or her demands and exposure. The following items need to be considered to keep your horse healthy and offer the best protection against diseases and parasites: nutrition and body condition score, dentistry, vaccination guidelines, internal parasites, and management.

Nutrition is often overlooked especially when you have an “easy keeper”. These are the horses that can survive on very little nutritional intake. The easy keeper usually has a high body condition score (overweight) which in the owner’s mind equates to healthy and happy. This may be true, or it may be that a high body condition score is actually detrimental to long term health. There are many problems that could be discussed, treated, and managed with the help of your veterinarian. Insulin Resistance and Metabolic Insufficiency are two metabolic conditions that require management changes to keep the horse’s weight and health in good physical shape. On the opposite side of things, under conditioned horses or horses with a low body condition score may need more than just extra feed. They may be deficient in a particular supplement, they may need their teeth floated, they may have parasites, or they may have an underlying medical condition that requires a diagnostic work-up.

In general, oral exams should be performed at least yearly. With the economic crunch yearly oral exams have been overlooked in many management situations. Having your horse’s teeth floated contributes to healthy digestion, body condition and performance. Keeping your horse’s teeth in good condition may be more economical than spending money on higher volumes of feed, bit changes due to poor performance, or emergency veterinary calls for health conditions including choke. Routine dental exams and treatments will help prevent problems from occurring or catch them at an early stage.

There are many different vaccination combinations on the market now. Your veterinarian can help you determine which one is the best for your individual horses. The core vaccines that are recommended in the southeast include West Nile Virus, Eastern and Western Encephalitis, Tetanus and Rabies Virus. The first three are recommended two to three times a year depending on exposure in Florida. This should not be confused with the labeled recommendations for Encephalitis and West Nile virus being once a year for horses in the north. Horses in Florida are exposed to the disease carrying vectors for a longer period of time per year than what the vaccine provides protection.

Rabies is recommended yearly, even in older horses that have been routinely vaccinated. The immune system of the older horse may be compromised and therefore it is important to not lapse in this vaccine. Don’t forget that this virus is a human health concern AND that it is only allowed to be administered by a licensed veterinarian. Some of the other non-core vaccines that may be recommended depending on your horse’s exposure in Florida include Rhinopneumonitis, Influenza,

and Strangles. If you plan to travel outside of the state of Florida with your horse, please discuss your travel plans with your veterinarian so she/he can make other vaccine recommendations if they are necessary.

Internal parasites can go undiagnosed in a “properly de-wormed” horse until the parasites endanger your horse’s well being or become life-threatening. De-worming strategies have changed over the last few years. There has been proven resistance to many of the common anthelmintics (de-wormers). This has made checking a fecal sample for parasite eggs much more of a priority and even a necessity. The “common rotation” no longer ensures that your horse is protected. Some horses are being over de-wormed while others have resistance and therefore the treatment is not effective. Pasture management is also pertinent. It is recommended to remove manure weekly from crowded pastures. New horses should have fecal egg counts and proper de-worming before being introduced to resident horses.

The benefit of a routine veterinary exam along with management changes and any of the above mentioned procedures could save you from an emergency call. Catching problems early and discussing positive changes in management will provide your horse with the best possible care. Prevention through a good wellness plan is key to your horse’s health. Consult with your veterinarian, as many veterinarians have developed “wellness plans” to make your horse’s basic health and preventative maintenance cost effective.

Contact Brandon Equine Medical Center at 813-643-7177 or email info@brandonequine.com with any questions regarding this topic.

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