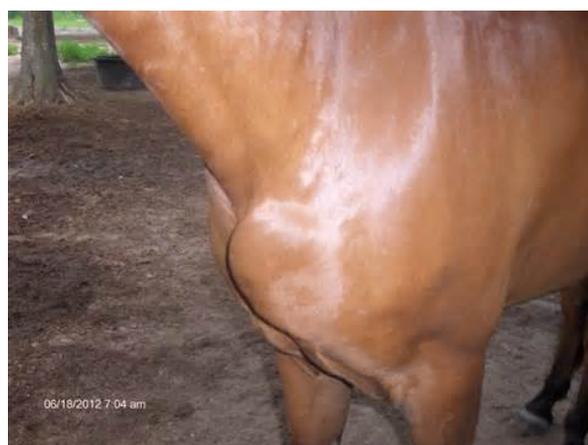
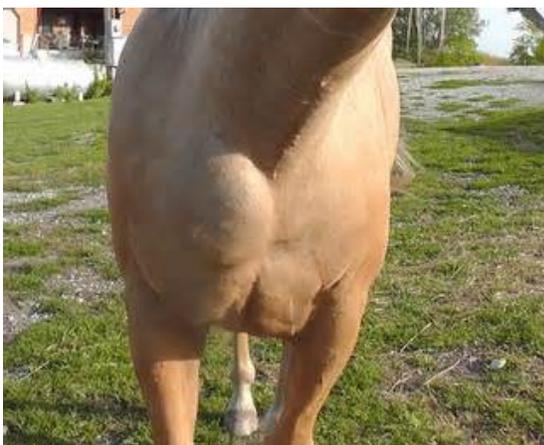




Pigeon Fever: Diagnosis, Treatment and Prevention

by Michelle Twilla, DVM

Pigeon fever is an infectious disease caused by bacteria (*Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis*). This bacteria is found in the soil and prefers hot, dry conditions. Albeit, Florida is not thought of as having a dry climate there are many confirmed cases of pigeon fever each year. *C. pseudotuberculosis* is transmitted to the horse through biting insects and abrasions/open wounds where it progresses into a local infection within the lymph node and an abscess forms. Any area of the horse can be affected yet most commonly the abscess forms on the pectoral or chest region of the horse giving the appearance of a “pigeon breast”.



Due to the toxins released by the bacteria a large amount of swelling, pain, and lameness occurs as the abscess develops. Many horses develop fevers (temperature >101.5F) with some becoming ill demonstrating a poor appetite, and lethargy. Abscess can also form internally and is associated with a more serious disease and guarded prognosis. Your veterinarian can perform blood tests as well as ultrasound examination to diagnose internal abscesses. This presentation is less common and even more so is the development of ulcerative lymphangitis. Ulcerative lymphangitis progresses as severe swelling of the legs with draining tracts that develops along the lymphatics. Other diseases that share similar clinical appearance to ulcerative lymphangitis are cellulitis and purpura hemorrhagica caused by *Streptococcus equi* (strangles).

Diagnosis of pigeon fever is often suspected based on “classical” clinical appearance of a pectoral abscess. A definitive diagnosis is made through a bacterial culture. For a horse that is systemically ill it is wise to evaluate blood work for signs of overwhelming infection and monitor organ function.

Treatment of pigeon fever is primarily lancing and draining the matured abscess. Application of warm compresses and drawing salves can promote maturation, bringing the abscess to a head. Your veterinarian may ultrasound the swelling to determine when and where the abscess should be drained. Once drainage is achieved the abscess should be flushed with dilute betadine solution daily.

The use of systemic antibiotics is controversial as many clinicians feel that it will slow the development of the abscess and may encourage internal abscesses to form. The decision to use antibiotics should be made by your veterinarian. He or she will likely prescribe anti-inflammatory medications to control fever

and pain resulting from the infection. Fly control is paramount in disease prevention and reducing the spread of the disease especially when the abscess is actively draining. The highest concentration of the bacteria is in the discharge and will contaminate the environment. Practicing good hygiene and light biosecurity measures on the farm such as disinfecting stalls where infected horses are kept, sanitizing grooming equipment, and treating the infected horses in areas that are easily disinfected such as concrete flooring.

A vaccine has recently been developed and release on condition license for the prevention of pigeon fever, however, further studies to evaluate the efficacy and potency of the vaccine are still underway.

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

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