

POTOMAC HORSE FEVER

Equine Monocytic Ehrlichiosis, *Neorickettsia risticii* (formerly *Ehrlichia risticii*)

Potomac Horse Fever was first described in the mid 1970's in the Potomac River area. It has since been found throughout the US and Canada. The disease is caused by the bacterium *Neorickettsia risticii*. A fluke, which parasitizes freshwater snails and certain insects, such as mayflies, caddisflies, damselflies dragonflies and stoneflies, is the source of the bacteria. Once the snail or insect is infected they carry it out into the horse's field where the horse consumes it. Consequently, most cases occur near freshwater rivers or streams and during the summer and fall when insects are most active. Other risk factors include living near ponds, the amount of time spent out on pasture and the reduction of the use of insecticides. It is important to note that the disease is not spread directly between horses.

If a horse becomes infected it will start with a two part fever. The first fever will appear 7-10 days after infection and will last one to two days. The second fever appears 10-14 days after infection and is more severe and is accompanied with other signs. This is when pipe stream diarrhea develops often causing dehydration, colic and the horse to become toxic. Laminitis occurs in up to 25% of cases. The illness can last anywhere from 2-10 days. Treatment includes the antibiotic tetracycline along with supportive therapies such as IV or oral fluids, banamine, and other gastrointestinal protectants.

Research shows that natural infection gives immunity for approximately two years. Vaccines are available but provide imperfect protection. Horses occasionally still get sick after vaccination but tend to have a milder form of the disease. Vaccines give short-lived protection lasting three to six months. Foals rarely get the disease so they can wait until they are yearlings to receive the vaccine. Research has shown that broodmares infected with Potomac Horse Fever can abort at seven months gestation.