

# Potomac Horse Fever

## Potomac Horse Fever (PHF)

Potomac Horse Fever, or equine monocytic ehrlichiosis, has become an increasing problem in our area.

### What is PHF?

Potomac Horse Fever is caused by *Ehrlichia risticii*, a rickettsial organism, that can only survive within living cells. Once it gets into a horse's bloodstream, it infects specific white blood cells. As the disease progresses, the organism can infect cells in several organs, including the lining of the colon.

### Clinical Signs

The clinical signs of PHF can range from a simple loss of appetite to severe colic and/or laminitis and death. Common signs include profuse diarrhea, depression, fever, colic, and lack of appetite.

Diarrhea was always considered the 'cardinal sign' of PHF. Yet, more than 40% of diagnosed PHF cases never break with diarrhea!!! They suffer from 'ileus' and colitis, but do not produce diarrhea. Recent studies also show that PHF can cause pregnant mares to abort.

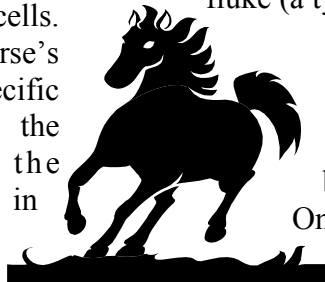
The majority of PHF cases are seen during the summer months.

### Transmission

One of the greatest mysteries of this disease is the source of transmission. It is believed to be

spread through a vector or carrier and not directly from horse to horse.

Because the organism can only survive within living cells, blood-sucking insects or arthropods have been targeted as being responsible for the spread of the disease. There has also been speculation about ticks as the culprit or possibly a fluke (a type of worm).



### Diagnosis

Diagnosis of PHF can also be difficult. Once again, this disease can mimic the

clinical signs of many other conditions and the veterinarian has a difficult task to determine the diagnosis.

Blood tests for PHF titers can be misleading and take several days to receive results. Often, the horse's clinical response to therapy is one of the most important factors in diagnosing PHF.

### Treatment

The good news is that most horses respond to oxytetracycline antibiotic therapy relatively quickly. Early diagnosis and treatment are essential to a favorable outcome. An infected horse might also require supportive therapy such as intravenous fluids, electrolytes, and anti-inflammatory drugs.

### Prevention

As always, prevention is much easier and inexpensive than treatment. The vaccine for Potomac Horse Fever is not 100% effective (closer to 50-70%) but, some protection is still much better than no protection. Vaccinated horses which contract the disease will suffer much less severe effects than non-vaccinated horses.

The other concern is that the vaccine's protection only lasts 4-6 months. Thus, it is recommended that horses be vaccinated every 4-6 months. It is also important that you time your vaccination schedule so that they are protected during the highest peak of incidence during the summer.

The battle with PHF continues. Until researchers pinpoint the carrier of this disease, other preventative measures are impossible to implement.

Several years ago, most cases were seen along the Potomac River (hence, the name-Potomac Horse Fever). Unfortunately, the incidence of positively diagnosed cases has steadily increased during the last few years, regardless of travelling history or exposure to 'swampy water', etc. Any horse has the potential of contracting Potomac Horse Fever.

**Countrycare diagnosed and treated several horses with PHF last summer... please protect your horse from this devastating disease!!!**