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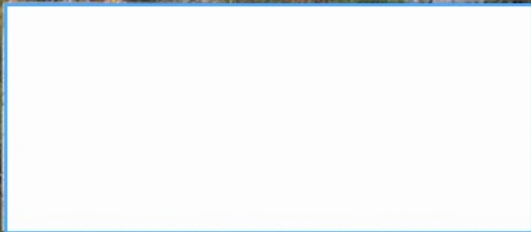
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CAN vaccination AFFECT YOUR HORSE'S FEET?



THE ANSWER IS *yes*

by Geri White

Vaccination is a very touchy and hotly debated topic. I believe in informed decision-making. This is why I encourage my clients to examine all sides of this issue.

What I would like to do in this article is give you information that can be placed on both sides of the scale, as well as share a few personal experiences in rehabilitating horses and how vaccinations can affect the process.

IMMUNIZE WISELY

The best place to start is with a quote from noted vaccine scientist, Dr. Ronald Schultz from UW School of Veterinary Medicine: "Be wise and immunize, but be wise how you immunize." Dr. Schultz's mantra is universal, and crosses all species. I also believe it brings a better balance to the subject, since we currently have those who believe annual vaccines should always be administered, and those who believe that no vaccines should ever be given. These represent the extreme views. Where we need to be looking is somewhere in the middle. We also need each horse to be treated as an individual, based on how he responds or reacts when vaccinated. A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work, based on what I have observed in the field.

TITERS AND MEMORY CELLS

My interest in all this was sparked by an incident over 20 years ago. I was exposed to a rabid raccoon in my barn and received post-exposure treatment. I asked my doctor if I should get an annual booster, and he told me I should first have a blood titer drawn, but added that, chances were, I should have a high titer level for many years. At the time, I had no idea what a titer was.

I never forgot my doctor's words, and was given another opportunity to investigate this topic further when my dog had an adverse reaction to a rabies vaccination. Veterinarian Dr. Jean Dodds ran titers for all my dog's puppy shots. As we discussed the results, Dr. Dodds told me that immunity is like pregnancy – you either "are" or "are not". You cannot impart more immunity to an already immune individual. Any measurable titer is evidence of immunity. Beyond the evidence in the blood, T-cells and B-cells (aka memory cells) are also part of the picture; we can't measure them but they operate to protect us and our animals just the same. Memory cells persist for 20 or more years, and are not increased by re-vaccination.

THE VACCINE/HOOF CARE CONNECTION

In my practice as a hoof care professional, all new clients fill out an extensive information sheet to help me look for patterns and reasons why their horses have lameness symptoms. Spring is the most common time of year for this to happen. My peers call it laminitis season. I am always on the search for why, because unless a horse actually injures a hoof, most lameness issues have their genesis in the body, and often originate from many sources, as opposed to just one. Common threads show up time and again in springtime lameness incidents. Vaccinations are high on the list, especially when several are given at once and when a horse has an ongoing health issue like Cushing's, Lyme, allergies, or a challenged or compromised immune system. Veterinarian Dr. Mark DePaolo states in his article on vaccinations: "A 2003 study conducted by researchers from Texas A&M University

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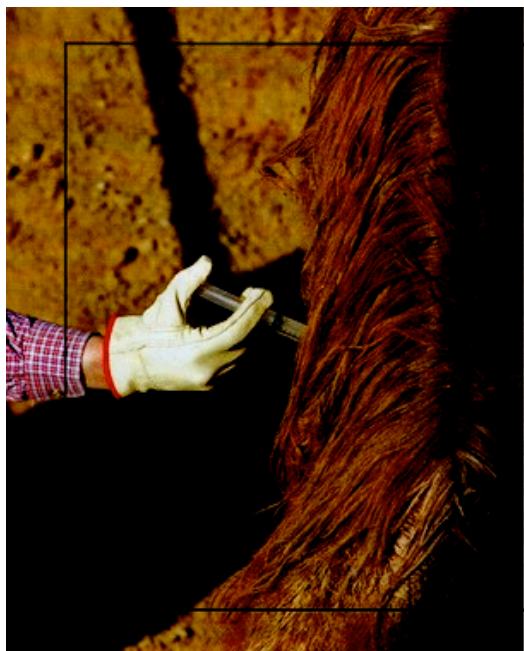


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ARE WE DOING TOO MUCH?

In most cases, people give their horses vaccine boosters every year, because veterinarians recommend it. I started to ask myself: "Why do we do this to our animals and not ourselves?" That question led to many others. If you think about the human lifespan as compared to horses, dogs and cats, we outlive them all by three or more times. I have received possibly a dozen or fewer vaccines in my 55 years, yet the average horse under typical conventional care can receive as many as seven to 14 every year. If the horse lives to be 25, that's 175 to 350 vaccines over his lifetime!

suggests a link between routine vaccination and acute episodes in horses with chronic laminitis. According to the study, chronically laminitic horses have a heightened sensitivity to vaccines compared to healthy horses due to changes in their immune systems."

What I am seeing in the field are soles that once had good concavity flatten and become sensitive; soft/thinning soles that were healthier through the winter; ripples and red/pink blushing in the hooves that mark the event; and abscessing. This is more common than you may think.

MODIFYING YOUR APPROACH

So what can we do? Let's go back to Dr. Shultz's "mantra". Even though rabies visited me personally, I still do not believe that annual boosters are necessary. I had one of my horses titered after a laminitis episode and the lab reported a 1:4500 titer level. 1:5 is sufficient to protect a human. Every client that has run titers for rabies reported extremely high titer levels, some after only three vaccinations. Yes, it costs more than just administering the vaccines, but the money is well spent, especially when you know your horse has had negative reactions in the past. There is no need to assault his system when it is not necessary.

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Learn about titers and open a dialog with your veterinarian. Build up your horse's immune system. To do that, you may need to change some of your care practices, especially if they are conventional. Horses need to be horses, and they need a life that respects their nature and not just what is convenient for us.

I am often asked about shows and boarding barns. Check with show organizations and barn managers to see if they will accept a titer test result, especially if your horse has had a negative reaction in the past. If they won't, work with your vet to customize a plan that will give your horse only one vaccine at a time, and long before the start of show season or a move to a new barn. Contact a holistic vet who knows homeopathy; remedies can help with negative reactions to vaccines.



In my opinion, it is we who drive shows and events, so we have a choice how we want our horses to live. We vote with our presence and our dollars. We need to demand that things be done differently, and we want our horses to be treated as individuals. For some, this will open the door to thinking differently about what we are doing and why we do it. I will not take my horse anywhere that requires vaccines for participation. His health and well-being are worth far more to me than a ride, a good time, a blue ribbon or a cash award. He is, after all, my friend, and he depends totally on me for everything in his life. I am the one who can make it or break it. ●

Geri White has an Equine Sciences Degree from the Equine Sciences Academy, Natural Hoof Care Certification and is a Field Instructor. She is also certified through the American Hoof Association, has served as Director of Education and currently serves on the Board of Directors as President (Nativehoof.com). Parts of this article are from another article written by Geri entitled "Vaccinations".

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