

COVID-19 vs. Strangles

Both highly infectious diseases, what are the similarities and differences between Covid-19 in humans and Strangles in horses? Bacteriologist Dr Andrew Waller of the Animal Health Trust compares the two.

	COVID-19	Strangles
What causes the disease?	Virus emerged in 2020	Bacteria around for centuries, though current strain dates to WWI
Disease status	Pandemic	Globally endemic
Perception	New and dangerous	Old and often viewed as inevitable
What are the signs?	Headache, temperature, coughing	Temperature, abscessed lymph nodes, nasal discharge, coughing
Proportion affected?	Most people do not fall seriously ill	All horses can fall seriously ill (can be 100%)
Mortality rate?	1% (much higher in those at-risk)	1% (higher in young and old horses)
Time before showing signs	7 days?	4 to 21 days
Recovery	7 - 28 days?	28 days or longer
Are recovered individuals infectious to others?	No	Sometimes. Around 10% of recovered horses become carriers and still pose a risk to others
Can you get it again?	Possibly	Possibly, immunity lasts for approximately 5 years
Transmissibility	Light, spreads more easily through the air - highly transmissible	Heavy, may spread via coughing, but more likely via drinking water - highly transmissible
Importance of surfaces	Contact with contaminated surfaces and then touching face	Contact with contaminated riding equipment/clothing/other surfaces
Prevention	Wash hands, clean surfaces	Owners should wash hands and disinfect shared surfaces, riding equipment, water troughs etc
How to avoid becoming infected?	Reduce contact with other people (social distancing)	Quarantine new arrivals to prevent spread to resident horses. Prevent horses sharing drinking water with horses from elsewhere
How to prevent spreading the disease to others?	Self-isolation	Speak out about Strangles! Shut down yard Use quarantine procedures
How is infection diagnosed?	Antigen test that detects the virus' RNA on patient swab samples	DNA test on a swab sample to detect the bacteria
How do you know if you've recovered?	Antibody test (blood test) to show that your immune system recognises the virus (person now safe to mix with others)	Antibody test (blood test) to show the horse's immune system has recognised the bacteria (horse may still be a carrier and could spread Strangles to others)
How do we prevent disease in the long term?	Vaccination Using good hygiene practices	Vaccination Preventing strangles carriers Using good hygiene practices
Social impact	Sympathy for those infected Importance of co-ordinated effort Small, important steps reduce risk	Stigma around the disease Importance of co-ordinated effort Small, important steps reduce risk

Whatever the disease, in whatever species, good biosecurity is key to stopping the spread!

Help to Stamp Out Strangles at www.redwings.co.uk/strangles/make-a-pledge