

Pigeon fever outbreak confirmed in horses in Wyoming

The University of Wyoming (UW) Department of Veterinary Sciences has confirmed an unusual outbreak of pigeon fever in horses in the Laramie County area and also throughout the state and parts of Colorado. Treatment is available through local veterinarians.

Cases of the bacterial disease, also known as dryland distemper, have been diagnosed in Laramie, Goshen, Uinta and Lincoln counties. More than 55 horses in the Cheyenne area are showing the symptoms of deep abscesses and multiple sores along their chests and midlines. Lameness, fever, lethargy and weight loss can also accompany the disease, which causes a painful swelling in a horse's pectoral muscles that resembles a puffed-out pigeon breast.

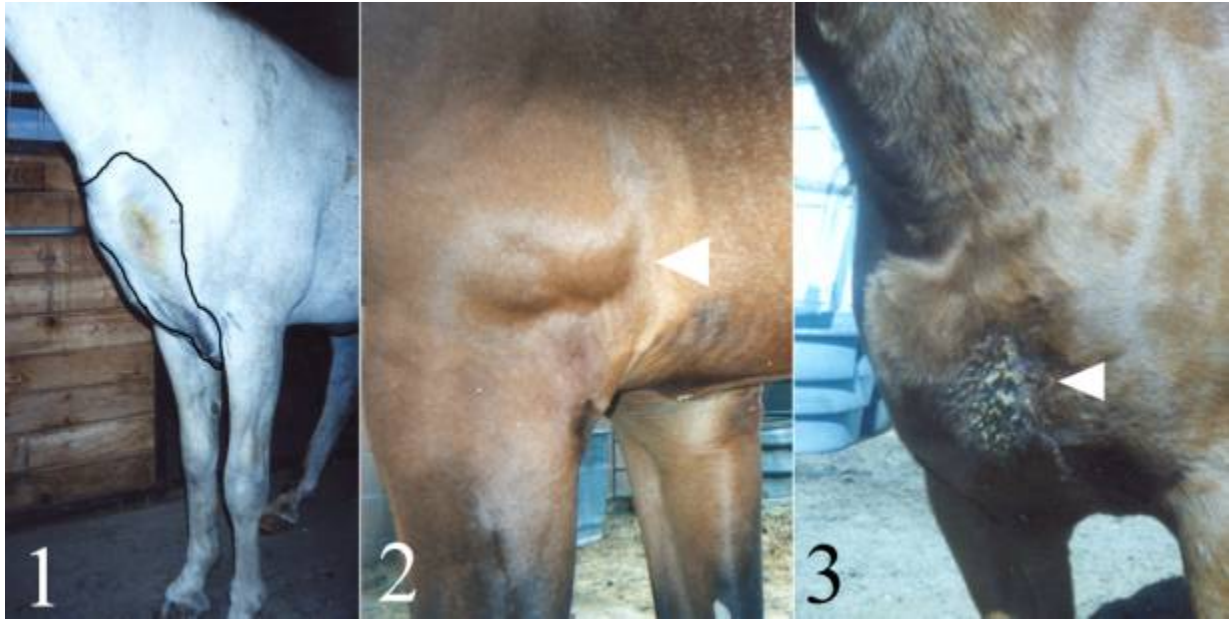


Photo caption: Numerous cases of pigeon fever (myositis in horses due to bacterium *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis*) have been diagnosed in Cheyenne-area horses in September-October 2002. Swellings in the pectoral region of horse 1 are outlined. Swellings may also over lateral portions of the forelimbs (horse 2, arrowhead) or on the ventral part of the belly. Swelling eventually discharge thick viscid purulent material (horse 3, arrowhead). *Photographs courtesy of Dr. J.D. Fox, Tri-State Large Animal Hospital, Cheyenne, WY.*

"It's showing up all over my practice area," said J. D. Fox of the Tri-State Large Animal Clinic in Cheyenne. He serves all of Laramie County as well as parts of northern Colorado. "It's not unique to breed, age, sex or location as far as I can tell. I have seen it probably as much in pasture horses as I have in stabled horses in terms of percentages." Fox recalls an outbreak of pigeon fever about 25 years ago but says that the cases he has been treating the last month and a half are the first ones he has seen since then. Mark Isom of the Uinta County Veterinary Clinic, who is treating horses in the Kemmerer area, does not remember ever seeing pigeon fever before.

The disease usually occurs in arid parts of the West in autumn and early winter, with the highest incidence in September, October and November. The causative bacteria, which are transmitted by flies, live in the soil and can enter a horse's body through wounds, broken skin and mucous membranes.

Although pigeon fever can generally run its course in a few weeks without treatment, Fox and other veterinarians recommend the use of anti-inflammatory drugs, pain relievers and antibiotics. Medication eases the discomfort of afflicted horses that suffer from chest pains and have difficulty walking. "If this thing continues, many more flies are going to be affected," Fox said. "Treatment limits the amount of exposure healthy horses have to the disease. If it's left untreated, it's more likely to spread."

Fox said he has heard that pigeon fever can be fatal to yearlings and possibly to adult horses if the infection reaches their internal organs or legs. "It should be treated very aggressively if it goes to the legs because of the scar tissue that's left around those tendons," he said. While the prognosis is generally good for a complete recovery from the fever, some horses might have a recurrence of abscesses or sores once treatment is stopped. Others might seem to be cured, only to develop more clinical signs in a matter of months.

Alice Marie Gerty of Frontier Veterinary Clinic north of Cheyenne treated a horse from southern Colorado that was brought to Torrington. "It showed the chest swelling and was lame and sore. It just didn't want to move," she said. The horse recovered after she lanced its abscesses and medicated the animal. Abscesses on affected horses can be very large and can sometimes require surgical intervention to promote drainage.

It is recommended that contaminated stalls, paddocks and utensils be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. Because flies carry the bacteria, pest control can also serve as a deterrent to the spread or continuance of the disease.

The Wyoming Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory's bacteriology unit has been testing cultures of suspected pigeon fever since late August. Donal O'Toole, head of the lab and of the UW veterinary sciences department, speculates that drought conditions may be contributing to the current outbreak. Information he has gathered from colleagues in Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado support this theory. Once the disease takes hold in a particular season, hundreds of cases can be diagnosed in a "pigeon fever year." In other years the condition seems to disappear. O'Toole notes that the incidence in the Larimer County area of northern Colorado has ranged from one per year to 18 confirmed cases among 100 clinical cases. "It is unusual to see the disease in Wyoming," said O'Toole. "New cases should end with the first hard frost."

Horse owners who suspect that their animals may have contracted pigeon fever should contact a veterinarian for a diagnosis and a proper treatment regimen.