

Basic Fact Sheet - Viral Encephalitis in Animals
Texas Department of Health, Zoonosis Control Division

What is viral encephalitis?

Viral encephalitis is a brain infection caused by specific viruses, such as eastern, western and Venezuelan equine encephalitis (EEE, WEE, and VEE) and West Nile virus (WNV). In normal situations, these diseases are transmitted by mosquitoes and are best known for affecting horses and people. Other domestic animals may also be affected by some of these viruses.

How can an animal get viral encephalitis?

The viruses are spread by mosquitoes.

What are the signs of viral encephalitis?

After ½ to 2 days, horses will have fever and a fast heart rate; they will stop eating, and look depressed. Weakness and staggering are followed by muscle spasms, chewing movements, incoordination (loss of balance), and seizures. The survival rate (number that live) varies for the different viruses. Of the infected animals that do not survive, some will die rapidly (within a few hours) while others could live several weeks before dying.

How is viral encephalitis diagnosed?

Only laboratory testing can provide a definite diagnosis.

How is viral encephalitis treated?

Treatment of animals showing signs of disease is limited to nursing care.

Is a viral encephalitis vaccine available?

Vaccines are available for horses. They should be given yearly. To be effective, the horse must be vaccinated before it is exposed to a virus.

Can infected animals spread viral encephalitis?

Mosquitoes spread the disease to horses and people after feeding on infected birds. Mosquitoes cannot spread the viruses from infected horses to other animals and people.

What is done with animals that die of viral encephalitis?

There are no special burial or disposal requirements.

How can I protect my animals and myself?

Vaccinate horses. Help control mosquitoes by removing standing water in house gutters and trash (such as old tires). Do not allow water to stagnate (stand too long) in birdbaths, pet bowls, flowerpots, wading pools, and other places where mosquitoes breed. Use mosquito repellents and wear long-sleeved clothing.