

# Contagious Equine Metritis

This disease was eradicated from Australia in 1985.

Contagious equine metritis (CEM) is a transmissible venereal disease of horses caused by the bacterium *Taylorella equigenitalis*. Because animals may be asymptomatic, the disease is difficult to detect and control.

CEM is a serious disease because it is highly contagious and when coupled with the fact that mares can be bred only during certain seasons, CEM can have a devastating effect on equine reproductive efficiency. Should CEM become established in the Australia the horse industry would suffer great economic losses.

The first case was diagnosed in England in 1977. Because of the insidious nature of the disease, it is difficult to determine its origin or how widely it is distributed throughout the world.

CEM is commonly transmitted directly during sexual intercourse between undetected CEM positive breeding mares and stallions. Transmission may also occur indirectly by artificial insemination or contact with fomites, such as contaminated hands or instruments. Outbreaks usually occur at breeding facilities. Undetected carrier mares and stallions are the source of infection for acute outbreaks of the disease.

During the breeding season, a carrier stallion may infect several mares before the disease is suspected or diagnosed. Initial exposure to the disease usually results in infertility. An infected mare may fail to conceive (revealed by an early return to estrus after breeding) or she may spontaneously abort. Abortions related to CEM are rare, however. Stallions exhibit no clinical signs but can carry the CEM bacteria on their external genitalia for years. There are three general degrees of infection in mares.

- Acute: Active inflammation of the uterus causes an obvious thick, milky, mucoid vulvar discharge 10 to 14 days after breeding.

- Chronic: Milder uterine inflammation causes less obvious vulvar discharge, and infection may be more difficult to eliminate.

- Carrier: The bacteria are established in the reproductive tract. The mare, though asymptomatic, is still infectious and can remain a carrier for several months or longer.

Swabs for bacteriologic cultures from mares are taken from the cervix or endometrium of the uterus during estrus, clitoral fossa, and clitoral sinuses.

Swabs from stallions should be taken from the penile sheath, fossa glandis, and urethral sinus. In mares, various blood tests may be used to detect antibodies to the CEM bacteria. In stallions, detectable antibodies do not develop. The mare cannot be successfully treated until the CEM bacteria clear from the uterus, a process that may take several months. The external genitalia of the mare and stallion can be treated with disinfectants and antibiotics.



Milky discharge from vulvar