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## The Power of Preventive Care

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A new horse owner might believe that their horse is supposed to be dewormed every other month, and receive vaccinations twice a year. Based on advice from on-line chat groups and horse-owning friends, the new owner buys the needed treatments from the local feed store. Another friend shows the new owner how to administer the vaccinations and deworm the horse. Year after year, the horse seems to do OK with this approach, until the horse begins to lose weight, has a decreased appetite, eats more slowly and seems lethargic. The owner notices that the horse has bad breath and reddened gums. The owner reaches out to friends and to on-line resources and determines that the horse likely needs its teeth floated. Imagine the owner's shock and

heartbreak when the veterinarian diagnoses advanced kidney disease as the primary cause. What could this owner have done to possibly have a different outcome?

### What is Preventive Care?

An interesting question to ask horse owners is "What is preventive care"? Many would likely reply that it is how they feed their horses, the opportunity for horses to interact socially with each other, hoof care, providing comfortable housing, adequate exercise, and the love and affection they show to their horses. The owners would not be wrong; these are important components in the well-being of horses. However, preventive care is incomplete without preventive medicine.

## The Value of Preventive Medicine

Preventive medicine refers to the care a horse receives to prevent diseases, and to identify problems proactively rather than reactively, as the story above illustrates. When health concerns are identified before they are clinically obvious, actions can be taken to manage disease progression. In the case of kidney disease, annual senior screening bloodwork might have detected abnormalities early in the course of the disease, allowing for a change in diet that lessened the work the kidneys must do in clearing metabolic byproducts from the bloodstream. Common medications that are processed by kidneys, including anti-inflammatories like Bute and Banamine, could be avoided. This would reduce the risk of further kidney damage. The end result is a horse that lived a longer, better quality life with proactive lifestyle modifications.

When horse owners decide to partner with veterinarians, the owner learns how to best protect their horses from current diseases and as well as newly emerging threats. By asking questions like “What should I be doing in this stage of my horse’s life to be proactive with his health?” or “What else should I know to take great care of my horse now?” owners can take a hands-on approach.

The foundation of preventive medicine is the wellness examination. Typically, it will include a history about how your horse is doing, what you are feeding your horse, questions about your horse’s lifestyle and how it is used, such as trail riding or if it is actively being shown. The veterinarian will observe the general housing and management of your horse and ask about any behavioral concerns, such as wind sucking, stall weaving, or cribbing. Based on this assessment, the veterinarian

will recommend appropriate preventive measures like vaccinations, fecal evaluations to determine the proper dewormer needs of your horse, provide nutritional advice and suggest ways to address behavioral concerns.

## Recommendations for Proactive Equine Care

### Regular physical examinations

A comprehensive physical exam includes a tip of the nose to tip of the hooves exam, assessing all major body systems including dental health, a musculoskeletal exam done while at rest and while moving, palpation of joints, examination of the hooves, and a pain assessment. Based on the age of your horse and its job, your veterinarian will recommend physical examinations every 6-12 months.

### Weight Assessment

During the physical examination the veterinarian will evaluate your horse’s weight and body condition. Obesity is common in horses, due to overfeeding in relation to their lifestyles. Recent studies suggest that equine obesity affects up to 70% of horses and is associated with conditions such as metabolic syndrome, joint disease, infertility and poor performance. If your horse is overweight, your veterinarian will provide nutritional counseling.

### Vaccinations

Vaccinations for horses are designated as ‘core’ and ‘risk based’. Core vaccinations are those all horses should receive to protect them from debilitating and often fatal diseases. These include Rabies, Tetanus, Eastern and Western Equine Encephalitis and West Nile Virus.

Risk based vaccinations include those that are appropriate for your horse to receive, based on environmental hazards, the region of the country you live in, and the lifestyle

of your horse. Your veterinarian will look at where your horse lives (backyard horse vs. a stabled horse, for example), ask you about how you use your horse, and other questions to determine which additional vaccinations would be appropriate and necessary to protect the health of your horse.

The frequency of vaccination administration depends on the age of the horse and its lifestyle assessment. Foals usually receive a series of three doses of vaccinations throughout their first year of life. Adult horses usually receive annual vaccinations; some vaccinations must be given twice yearly. Timing of vaccination administration is also important; it is preferred to give vaccinations that protect against diseases transmitted by mosquito bites in the springtime, so your horse has good antibodies against those diseases when the mosquitos are most active. Your veterinarian will be able to advise you on the best vaccination schedule for your horse.

### Diagnostic Testing

Recommendations for diagnostic testing will vary based on the age of the horse and risk factors for diseases. They include blood, urine and fecal evaluations. Because horses can't tell us when something feels wrong, diagnostic testing often allows owners and veterinarians to detect abnormalities before disease is clinically evident. This 'early warning' means that changes can be made that will hopefully resolve the condition, or allow it to be easily managed. When the news is good, and the blood tests are normal, the owner and the veterinarian now have a baseline established, which is important in interpreting future abnormal findings.

Fecal examinations are recommended annually for all horses to determine the necessary deworming schedule specific to your horse's individual needs. The traditional method of deworming every two months has

led to parasite resistance among horses. For this reason, targeted dewormings should be based on the results of the fecal evaluation and current guidelines.

The costs of preventive medicine can add up, so it pays for horse owners to understand what financial tools exist to help budget for this care. Some equine veterinarians offer preventive care (wellness) plans, which usually combine the best care recommendations into a yearly bundled plan, with the cost divided into 12 equal payments. Equine health insurance is another way that horse owners can be prepared for future veterinary care expenses. It helps allow horse owners to focus on providing optimal medical care for the horse, rather than focusing on the cost of care. For more information about affordable equine health insurance programs\* that provide coverage for wellness, accidents, illness and colic, please visit [www.ProtectYourHorse.com](http://www.ProtectYourHorse.com).



\*Not available in every state

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