

POTOMAC HORSE FEVER

is in Wyoming and adjacent states

What is PHF?

Potomac horse fever (PHF) is a warm season disease of equines. Horses, mules and donkeys contract PHF after accidentally eating adult aquatic insects infected with a bacterium, such as mayflies and caddisflies. The disease begins with mild symptoms usually 1 to 3 weeks after ingestion of the infected insects. Symptoms the horse owners should watch for are:

- Depression—check the horse for fever ranging from 102–107 ° F
- Lack of appetite
- Watery diarrhea
- Mild colic (with watery but decreased gut sounds)
- Laminitis (founder) symptoms on all hooves



Contact your veterinarian if your horse exhibits any of these symptoms for further diagnostics to determine the exact cause.

As the disease progresses, more severe symptoms, such as acute laminitis, can occur and the disease can cause up to 30% mortality. Mares who are 100 to 160 days pregnant when infected with PHF, may abort at 190 to 250 days in their pregnancy after seeming to recover from the disease.

An infected equine does not spread PHF to other animals.

PHF is treatable

The cause of PHF is a bacterium so it is treatable with the correct antibiotics. If a PHF infection in a horse is recognized, diagnosed, and treated quickly, the animal's prognosis is greatly improved.

How are horses infected?

The risk of horses contracting PHF is linked to the emergence (hatch) from the water of adult forms of aquatic insects that occurs primarily in the spring and summer. Caddisfly, mayfly, stonefly, damselfly, and dragonfly species have all been found infected with the PHF-causing bacteria.

Caddisflies and mayflies probably present the greatest risk for accidental ingestion by horses because of their behavior of flying at night and attraction to security lights used around barns. These short-lived aquatic insects can end up contaminating horse water sources and feed mangers in barns when they die.

Horses grazing stream-side pastures may also accidentally consume aquatic insect adults sheltering in the grass. Caddisflies do this sheltering behavior during the day and damselflies do it during the night. However, many aquatic insect species can fly several miles from where they emerged from the water so infections in horses living miles away from water bodies are possible.

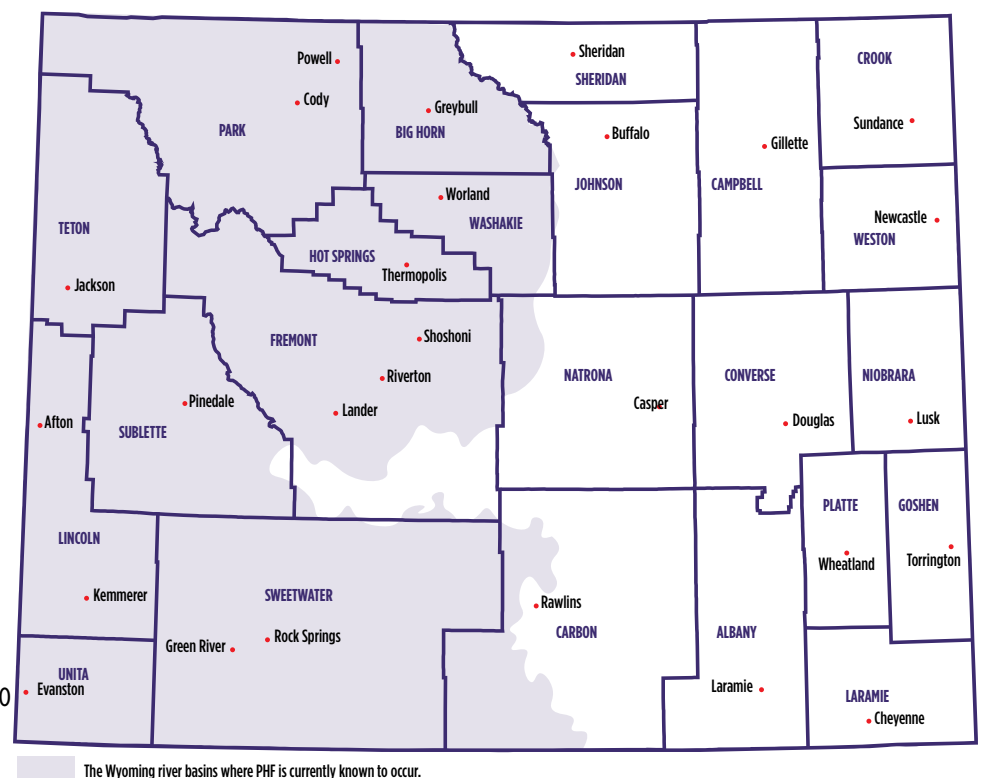
Where is it?

PHF is currently known to occur in western Wyoming and adjacent areas of Idaho, Utah, and Montana. PHF also occurs in parts of South Dakota and Nebraska. Veterinarians practicing in these parts of Wyoming are aware of the risk of PHF. New residents and people traveling with equines to these PHF regions may not be aware of PHF disease. This awareness is important as vaccination against PHF for equines brought to live in these regions can help reduce the severity of the disease in infected animals. In addition, the recognition of initial stage of PHF disease symptoms is critical so that proper treatment with intravenous antibiotics by a veterinarian can be rapidly started to result in a good recovery.

What can I do?

The best way to protect your valuable equines from PHF and keep them healthy is be aware of how they become infected, take action to reduce the risks, and vaccinate them.

Turning off barn lights during the summer nights when aquatic insects are flying is advisable to help prevent them from ending up in water troughs and mangers



Vaccines against PHF are available; however, they do not provide absolute protection due to variation in regional strains. Veterinarians in the PHF endemic regions think that the vaccination does lessen the severity of PHF. Consult with your veterinarian to decide on the best vaccine and vaccination program for your animals.



These Park County, Wyoming, horses contracted Potomac horse fever in the summer of 2020. The foal survived but the mare did not.

