

All of my horses are now retired from competing and I keep them at home where there aren't other horses coming in and out of the barn. Do I need to continue to vaccinate them on the same schedule they had when they were competing, or can I scale it back now that they aren't coming into contact with other horses?

Good news! More than likely you CAN scale your horses' vaccinations back since they're now "stay-at-home" horses. I can share some general guidelines with you here but your local veterinarian will be the best resource for your herd and your location so I encourage you two to chat.

In 2012, the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) released an updated version of its Vaccination Guidelines. This document, which is available on their website at www.aaep.org, includes many cool topics like Principles of Vaccination; Infectious Disease Control; and Vaccine Labeling, Technology, and Adverse Reactions. Their panel of experts also helpfully included sections which divide the available vaccines on the market into two groups: core vaccinations and risk-based vaccinations.

Core vaccinations are those "that protect from diseases that are endemic to a region, those with potential public health significance, required by law, virulent/highly infectious, and/or those posing a risk of severe disease. Core vaccines have clearly demonstrated efficacy and safety, and thus exhibit a high enough level of patient benefit and low enough level of risk to justify their use in the majority of patients." Basically, vaccinations identified as core protect against serious diseases that aren't spread horse-to-horse but picked up from the environment, other animals, or even insects. These are the ones all horses should receive. Core vaccinations include Eastern and Western Equine Encephalomyelitis (EEE and WEE, or "sleeping sickness"), Rabies, Tetanus, and West Nile Virus (WNV).

On the other hand, risk-based vaccinations are included in a vaccination program after the performance of a risk-benefit analysis. The use of risk-based vaccinations may vary regionally, from population to population within an area, or between individual horses within a given population. Disease risk may not be readily identified by laypersons; it is important to consult a veterinarian when developing a vaccination program. Basically, vaccinations identified as risk-based should be given when a horse's chances of picking up the disease are high. Only horses in certain states or that come into contact with other horses should receive these. Risk-based vaccinations include Anthrax, Botulism, Equine Herpesvirus (EHV or Rhinopneumonitis), Equine Viral Arteritis (EVA), Equine Influenza, Potomac Horse Fever, Rotaviral Diarrhea, Snake Bite, and Strangles.

Since you're already getting professional advice from your vet about which vaccines to give when, you may as well have him or her administer the immunizations. Not only does it save you from being the bad guy to your horse, but it may ultimately save your horse:

According to the AAEP: "Vaccines should always be administered by, or under the direct supervision, of a veterinarian, as the possibility of adverse reactions (including anaphylaxis) exists with the administration of any vaccine."

I'm sure your horses will thank you for taking the time to make an informed, intelligent decision regarding vaccinations and not just blindly forging ahead with a needle!

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