

# Equine infectious anemia: there is no epidemic

Equine infectious anemia is caused by a retrovirus which causes ungulates (horses, donkeys, mules, and zebras) to fall ill. The disease occurs worldwide, and many call it the “AIDS of horses”, though beyond the fact that human AIDS is also caused by a retrovirus, there is no other connection between the two diseases. The virus that causes equine infectious anemia does not cause human illness. In horses, a small percent of cases are already fatal in the early, acute, febrile stage with general symptoms, however, for the most part the course of the disease is protracted, with febrile seizures, anemia, weakness, and edema (watery swelling) throughout the body of the ill horses. Infected horses do not get well. Even during the period free of symptoms, they discharge the virus, which continues until the end of their lives, and so they pose a hazard to their environment. In Hungary the disease must be reported, which means that owners must inform service providers or the official veterinarians if they see symptoms of the disease. According to the latest scientific understanding, there are no vaccinations or other cures for the disease.

The disease spreads through infected blood, among other ways through blood-sucking insects (flies, biting flies), but infection can also spread through various substances containing blood. Infection can occur during mating and during veterinarian operations (such as mass immunization), if proper hygienic protocol is not adhered to. Experiments show that the virus only remains infectious in blood-suckers for an average distance of 150-200 meters. In order for the disease to be transmitted, usually several interrupted instances of blood-sucking (while the insects move from one animal to another) are required.

## MORE TESTING

“The discovery of new cases is not a consequence of escalating risk of contagion, but instead is a result of a greater number of samples, thanks to which we were able to diagnose cases of suspected disease in which the animals did not show clinical signs, and seemed healthy,” according to a prospectus to horse owners published by the NEBIH. Since 2011, EIA has been shown in 34 horses, including 7 cases that were diagnosed in the past year. So the current situation is no worse than it had been in years past. Except for the infections in the Üllő clinic, the number of positive cases of EIA did not rise – this is despite the fact that a considerably greater number of samples were evaluated. In Üllő, out of the horses that came into contact with the infected animal, three contracted the disease, while another two horses did not. Of the horses that were in the clinic but not in contact with the infected horse, none became infected. So there is no reason to fear, but it is very important to follow regulations strictly.

## INTERVIEW

The National Equestrian Association (Hung. *Nemzeti Lovaskultúra Szövetség, NLKSz*) interviewed Dr. Imre Nemes, vice-president of the NÉBIH food safety and animal health office, which we reproduce below.

**NLKSz:** *Is there an EIA epidemic or isn't there one?*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** There is no epidemic. The number of animals diagnosed with EIA is not rising.

**NLKSz:** *Many people doubt this...*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** EIA is a disease whose reporting is obligatory. Not only in Hungary, but throughout the



European Union. We constantly have to report the number of illnesses. For example, in 2011 we diagnosed EIA in 13 instances, but even in the past year, 7 horses fell victim to the disease.

**NLKSz:** *Even though many people thought that our country was free of the disease...*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** This is not true. Whoever claimed this did not look into the facts of the matter. In Hungary the virus has been present continuously over the past few years. Just as it was in Germany, in Greece, or in Spain. Sporadic cases have occurred everywhere.

**NLKSz:** *What is the reason for the increased attention now?*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** In March of 2015 a sick horse was transported to the Üllő clinic. The doctors did not suspect a contagious disease and placed the horse in a colic stable. The horse began hemorrhaging not long after, and infected three of the other horses that were staying there. It is important to note that even in a drastic case like this, not all of the horses became infected. Two of the other horses that were in the clinic at the time have repeatedly tested negative after many tests, as did a horse that was kept for years in the same area as the horse. The sad fact of the matter is that the infection occurred in a veterinarian clinic, which has ruffled some feathers.

**NLKSz:** *In case of the horses transported home from Üllő, quarantine was ordered. Why was this necessary?*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** Because in each suspected case, protective measures must be taken, in this case this means restriction of movement.

**NLKSz:** *Was there quarantine in the past few years?*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** Naturally. In every case.

**NLKSz:** *If a submitted sample tests positive, what happens next?*

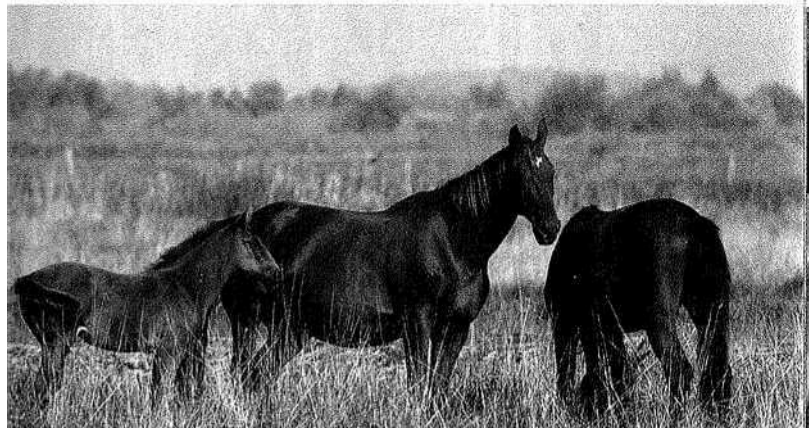
**Dr. Imre Nemes:** The NEBIH lab – which is the country's reference lab – reports the case and informs competent official veterinarian of the county government, who restricts movement from the place the horse is being kept, and makes arrangements to screen the animals there. Whoever financed the tests, as well as the location where the horse is kept, receives a copy of the order to restrict movement. If the horse is transported in defiance of the order, this incurs a fine by the National Food Chain Safety office.

**NLKSz:** *You have published a list of holding places containing horses that were at the clinic at the time, but not in contact with the infected horse. Were these horses screened?*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** Yes, and every test has come back negative. So they do not present a danger to their environment.

**NLKSz:** *In cases of quarantined horses, some owners have built isolation boxes. Is this a good solution?*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** Yes, it's a good solution, if several horses are kept together with one that is suspected of having the disease. But there are also veterinarian products that are effective at keeping



away the insects that are capable of transmitting EIA.

**NLKSz:** *The Magyar Patkolókovácsok Egyesülete (MAPE, Hungarian Farrier Association) named a special farrier for caring for the horses that are under quarantine. Is this a good solution?*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** Yes, it's a good idea and shows forward thinking! Tools that touch animals suspected of the illness must be sterilized – as far as they can be – before being suitable for use again, but as far as I know tools with wooden samples are destroyed by the MAPE in this case.

**NLKSz:** *What measures do you propose for curtailing the spread of the virus?*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** It is enough to follow the existing rules. If every horse owner screened their horses every three years, there would be even fewer cases.

**NLKSz:** *Responsible horse keepers have already been doing this, but there are some who do not declare their horses, and do not get a horse passport.*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** Such horses – at least in theory – shouldn't even exist. Every horse that leaves the place that it is kept needs a horse passport. So a horse may not be bought or sold without a horse passport.

**NLKSz:** *What should a horse keeper do, if he or she nevertheless encounters this phenomenon?*

**Dr. Imre Nemes:** In this case we ask people to call the toll-free NÉBIH number (06-80-263-244) and report that they have found an unidentified horse without documentation. The official veterinarian will make arrangements for the horses to be designated.

**So there is no need to panic!** Equine infectious anemia – if only sporadically – has been present and is present both in Hungary and in other EU member countries. To become completely free of the disease requires cooperation and mutual trust.

*Source: Nemzeti Lovaskultúra Szövetség (National Equestrian Association), NEBIH (National Food Chain Safety), [www.lovasok.hu](http://www.lovasok.hu)*