

Navigating a New Normal at the Barn

Barn etiquette and smart horse and human health practices to follow during a pandemic

Horse owners will remember 2020 as the year of canceled shows, postponed clinics, and the rise of virtual symposiums. It has been nearly one year since the novel coronavirus was discovered and started its deadly spread across the globe, and the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every part of our daily lives, from the way we work and vacation to the way we travel and gather (if we do the latter at all).

In the U.S., individual states, counties, and cities imposed varying degrees of regulations on businesses, often including equine facilities. During the early days of the pandemic, government mandates forced some training and boarding facilities to close completely, leaving owners unable to visit their horses. Barns that remained open often implemented restrictions on who could enter the property and when.

As we enter 2021, the question remains, what will barn life look like in the future? How do we stay healthy so we can be available to care for our horses? The answer starts with what scientists already know about SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Physical Distancing Is Important

“Current research supports that COVID-19 is primarily spread between people through respiratory droplets and aerosolization of the virus,” says Sally DeNotta, DVM, PhD, Dipl. ACVIM, a clinical assistant professor and equine veterinary extension specialist at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine, in Gainesville. “It’s therefore important for people to be aware of the air that they’re breathing and the air that they’re sharing with other people at the barn.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that



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Being outside, being socially distant, and wearing a mask are going to be the safest options when you are in the presence of other people at the barn.

SARS-CoV-2 is primarily transmitted via respiratory droplets produced when we exhale, during breathing, speaking, coughing, sneezing, or singing, for example. Larger droplets might be visible and fall out of the air quickly, while smaller droplets and particles can remain suspended for minutes to hours and travel far from the source on air currents. Studies indicate most transmission occurs through close contact—6 feet or less—with someone who has the virus.

“It is recommended that people from different households maintain at least 6 feet of distance between each other in both indoor and outdoor spaces to minimize the risk of transmission,” says Erin Goodrich, DVM, Dipl. ACVPM, director of veterinary support services at

the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine Animal Health Diagnostic Center, in Ithaca, New York. “In a barn setting this may mean limiting cross-tie use to every other cross-tie or taking turns in grooming areas.”

To encourage physical distancing, some barn managers have created schedules to minimize the number of people in the barn or using an arena at the same time. That isn’t possible at every barn, though. In many cases it will remain your responsibility to distance yourself from others as you enjoy your horse.

The barn manager might ask you to stay home if you are sick or think you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 symptoms in the past 14 days. Luckily, many barns are open and

well-ventilated, which are two factors the CDC says can reduce the concentration of droplets and particles carrying the virus.

Even in well-ventilated barns, you'll need to take extra precautions in some areas. Tack and feed rooms are classic examples of small enclosed spaces that can increase the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission. They also might lack adequate ventilation, which can allow respiratory droplets and particles to accumulate. Depending on the size of the space, it might be impossible to safely stay 6 feet away from others.

"Here in Florida, barns and arenas are often open-air style and remain well-ventilated year-round," DeNotta says. "Tack rooms, however, tend to be smaller air-conditioned spaces to prevent the high ambient humidity from damaging tack and supplies. In the barn where I keep my horse, we are permitted to care for our horses and ride without wearing masks in the communal open-air areas and outdoor arena. Everyone maintains social distancing at all times, and we all wear masks when we are in the tack rooms and the feed rooms. We also have a sign-up sheet that allows for boarders to request a time to be out at the barn alone. This strategy accommodates everyone's own personal safety and comfort levels while still allowing everyone to enjoy their horses."



SHELLEY PAULSON

Around the barn, regularly disinfect shared-use items such as pitchforks, wheelbarrows, feed scoops, hose ends, light switches, and stall door handles to reduce COVID-19 transmission risks.

Mask Up, and Wash Your Hands

"Social distancing should be practiced in combination with other preventive actions to minimize the spread of SARS-CoV-2, including wearing masks, avoiding touching your face with unwashed hands, washing your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or using hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol when soap and water are unavailable," Goodrich says.

Many researchers have shown that masks reduce COVID-19 spread, and both the CDC and the World Health Organization recommend wearing masks in public settings, at events and gatherings, and when physical distancing isn't possible.

Various equine organizations have implemented rules regarding mask use at horse shows, and barn owners might or might not require masks based on individual preferences or government requirements.

"The bottom line is that being outside, being socially distant, and wearing a mask is going to be the safest option when you are in the presence of other people," DeNotta says.

As deadly as SARS-CoV-2 can be, soap and water neutralize it easily. Washing your hands is a simple and effective way to reduce the spread of not only COVID-19 but also a host of other germs that can cause illness and disease.

The CDC notes it is especially

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²Reinemeyer CR, Vaala WE. Larvicidal efficacy of fenbendazole against a macrocyclic lactone-resistant isolate of *Parascaris equorum* in foals. Proceedings of the 55th Annual Meeting of the American Association of Veterinary Parasitologists. 2010, Atlanta, GA, p49.
³Lacey E. Mode of Action of Benzimidazoles. Parasitology Today; vol. 6, no. 4, 1990.



important to wash your hands after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing and after you have been in a public place. Treat any equine facility where you interact with other people as a public place, even if it is a privately owned stable with a small clientele.

“Make sure barns have adequate hand-washing stations,” DeNotta says. “If there aren’t enough spigots or sinks equipped with antiseptic soap for hand-washing stations, then having things like antiseptic hand wipes or hand sanitizers around the barn is a really good idea.”

Share Springly, Disinfect Liberally

In the early months of the pandemic, when it was unknown whether SARS-CoV-2 could be easily transmitted on surfaces, people wiped down and disinfected everything from door handles to groceries. That is changing as scientists discover more about the virus.

Research conducted at the University of Pavia, in Italy, and published in September 2020 in *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* indicates a low risk of surface transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in real-life conditions, provided people follow standard cleaning procedures.

Basic farm biosecurity measures, which should always include disinfecting shared equipment, remain important during a pandemic.

“While SARS-CoV-2 is thought to spread mainly from person to person, cleaning and disinfecting objects and surfaces that are frequently touched is a good way to further reduce the risk of transmission,” Goodrich says. “Shared equipment should be avoided whenever possible. When not possible, proper cleaning—and where appropriate, disinfection—of the object should occur at least between each use.”

Around the barn, shared-use items include pitchforks, wheelbarrows, feed scoops, hose ends, light switches, and stall door handles. How frequently you need to disinfect depends on the item’s surface material, how often it is handled, and how many people handle it.

“It is important to note that normal cleaning of surfaces and objects with soap and water must be performed prior to disinfection, in order to remove organic debris such as manure and dirt from surfaces,” Goodrich says. “Disinfectants

Physically Distant Essential Services

Pandemic or not, horses should never go without proper veterinary and hoof care.

“One of the more critical aspects from a veterinary standpoint is recognizing that in an effort to protect ourselves from COVID, we don’t want to inadvertently leave our horses susceptible to the infectious diseases that are ubiquitous in our regions,” says Sally DeNotta, DVM, PhD, Dipl. ACVIM, a clinical assistant professor and equine veterinary extension specialist at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine, in Gainesville. “This is particularly true for the core vaccines (tetanus, West Nile virus, EEE/WEE, rabies), which protect against life-threatening diseases only preventable through proper vaccination.”

On May 7, 2020, the American Association of Equine Practitioners issued a statement updating its vaccination guidelines to designate routine core and risk-based vaccinations as essential during the pandemic. This allowed veterinarians to continue vaccinating horses, even in areas where barns were shuttered due to mandatory closures.

In many cases veterinarians attended to horses without anyone else in the barn. That practice is likely to continue, even as regular veterinary services have mostly resumed. Providers such as farriers and bodyworkers might schedule appointments when they expect fewer people to be in the barn, and they might ask you to stay home if possible.

“Recognize that there might be differences in how your veterinarian requests your presence and assistance during your horse’s appointment,” DeNotta says. “Here at the University of Florida, we haven’t had horse owners in our hospital since March. This change was difficult for many owners at first, but it’s allowed us to remain open and provide critically important veterinary care while protecting the safety of our doctors and staff.”

Even though the logistics of your veterinary visits might look a little different, your vaccination schedule shouldn’t. DeNotta stresses the importance of keeping your horse’s vaccinations up to date, even if you aren’t traveling to shows or events.

“I have certainly had more than a couple of conversations with owners about the myth that if your horse doesn’t leave the property, it doesn’t need to be vaccinated,” she says. “It’s so important to remember that the core diseases are transmitted to horses via dirt, wildlife, and mosquitoes, so it doesn’t matter if your horse never leaves your yard, it is going to be exposed sooner or later.”—Stacy Pigott

are products that are meant to kill germs on surfaces following proper cleaning.”

The Environmental Protection Agency has produced a list of disinfectants it expects to kill SARS-CoV-2: [epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-coronavirus-covid-19](https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-coronavirus-covid-19).

Stay Current, and Be Adaptable

Our current safety measures are based on what we know about the novel coronavirus today. Public health recommendations have been developed and modified over the past year as researchers have learned more about SARS-CoV-2, and they will continue to change.

“Due to the nature of emerging diseases, guidance evolves as we learn more about the new pathogen or situation,” says Goodrich. “Therefore, protocols for disease control must also continue to evolve accordingly. Guidance surrounding appropriate group size, screening procedures, and other COVID-19 prevention strategies

should be based on the most current federal, state, and local public health communications. As the situation continues to evolve, barn owners must stay up to date with their local public health officials’ COVID-19 guidelines and regulations to ensure compliance and keep their boarders and workers safe.”

In addition to remaining aware of current public health issues, DeNotta recommends having a dose of self-awareness when it comes to interacting with owners, trainers, grooms, boarders, or anyone else you come into contact with at the barn.

“There is a lot of individual risk that determines how people put into practice their own protective measures,” she says. “I try to encourage everybody to, above all, do what’s right for you but also be respectful of other people’s needs to do what’s right for them. ... We just need to have some grace and recognize that there’s a spectrum of need to protect from this virus.” 🐾