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Here, the veterinarian is taking a sample of Comanche's pus to test it for the pigeon fever bacteria.



PIGEON FEVER: A First-Hand Account

by Tara Coyote

I wouldn't wish pigeon fever—also known as *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis* bacterin-toxoid—on my worst enemy. This audacious bacterial infection took my beloved mustang, Comanche, by storm twice in a period of nine months, leading me to become a reluctant expert on it. The first time I was thrown into the reality of a ginormous 15 by 15-inch pustule and scrambling to figure out how to deal with the repulsive reality of pigeon fever, I researched it to alleviate Comanche's suffering as best I could. Nine months later, the second time it reared its ugly head, I decided I would write an article about it to help others weather the storm. Hopefully my trials and tribulations will be of use to you, dear reader.

What is Pigeon Fever (And why is it called that?)

Pigeon fever is a fly-borne bacterial infection and actually has nothing to do with pigeons. The word 'pigeon' is used because it typically affects the horse's breast (pectoral muscles) where deep intramuscular abscesses become swollen like the chest of a pigeon. For the record, this not only can cause abscesses on the chest, but on the belly, top of the leg (as it did with my horse the second time), along the groin (sheath and udder) region, and internally—which can be dangerously fatal. 90% of pigeon fever cases affect the chest, 1% the lymph, and 9% are internal, affecting the lung, liver, and spleen.

The first cases of pigeon fever were reported in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, in the early 1900s. Since that time, disease caused

by these bacteria can be considered one of the most frequently diagnosed equine infections in the western United States, particularly in California. Evidence exists that infection is increasing in incidence and spreading eastward, possibly associated with climate change. Unprecedented epidemics in the past decade have affected thousands of horses in Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming—states historically low in prevalence. High temperatures and drought conditions preceded all reported outbreaks. This was a bacterium that would show up primarily in the fall, but due to global warming it is appearing year round. For example, Comanche got his second bout of it in the middle of February in Northern California.

Pigeon fever is a bacteria spread by flies in contact with pus from an abscess, which is transmitted through abrasions, wounds on the skin, or mucous membranes. The bacteria can live in the soil for many years. It's a bit of a mystery as there can be one horse in a herd that contracts the illness while others are not affected at all. Unfortunately, it seems there is no cut-and-dry formula for how pigeon fever runs its course.

Your Horse Has Pigeon Fever. Now What?

How to best deal with this malady? Once the abscess is apparent the best thing is to wait until it grows to the point where your veterinarian can lance and drain the pus. Once the abscess is drained it will need to be hosed out 2-3 times a day to clean away excess blood and pus, betadine applied to the wound with a syringe, and either a fly repellent or wound healer applied. If it is in the height of the fly season I recommend applying SWAT® directly on the wound to stop the possible spread of the disease. The cleaner the wound is kept, the better chance you have of containing it and preventing future infection. It is not known if bleach will kill the bacteria in the soil, but my tactic was to spray bleach diluted with water onto the area where I would clean Comanche and in his stall.

The use of antibiotics is controversial. Unless there are extenuating circumstances—such as internal abscesses or ulcerative lymphangitis—it is recommended that the horse affected by external or pectoral abscesses *not* be given antibiotics. If a horse is placed on antibiotics prematurely, in most cases the infection will

simply simmer along and resurface when antibiotics are discontinued, possibly even spreading to the internal organs in the interim.

Another friend of mine in Arizona had dealt with pigeon fever for six months. As I was clear I didn't want that to be my predicament, I immediately scoured the web for some sort of supplement to give Comanche. What I discovered was Dr. Joseph Thomas, Ph.D. 'Total Immune Health Formula' which can be found at: www.forloveofthehorse.com. Both times I gave this Chinese herbal formula to my horse and both times his duration of sickness was one month or so which seemed considerably shorter than other horses with this infirmity. The formula is directed to the bone marrow; this is the source of leukocyte production, which raises the white blood cell production to fight infections. I truly believe that this formula, which I gave to Comanche three times a day for the duration of his sickness and for a month after it was gone, helped shorten it, which was a relief to me and to my beloved horse as well.

For me, the hardest part of pigeon fever was enclosing my free-roaming mustang in a small paddock for weeks upon end to minimize the possibility of soil contamination. Luckily, he's a mellow guy, but still it was tough for me to see him stand day after day in the same area gazing

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The veterinarian inserted a hose to thoroughly clean out the wound.

High temperatures and drought conditions preceded all reported outbreaks.

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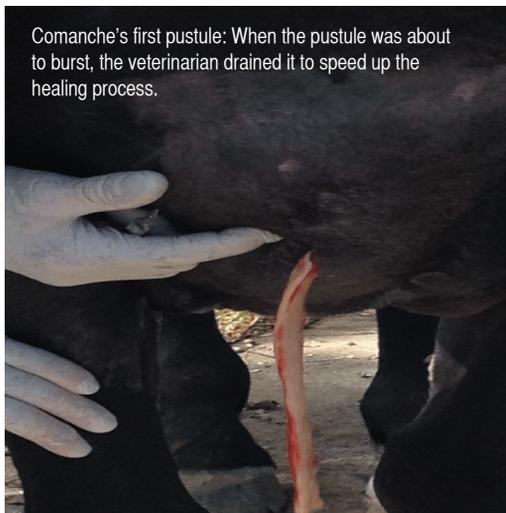
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Comanche's second pustule: Photo was taken just before the abscess was drained.



Comanche's first pustule: When the pustule was about to burst, the veterinarian drained it to speed up the healing process.

longingly out at his buddy in the pasture. I decided to buckle down and do the work it took to get him over the hump of discomfort for both of our sakes. It paid off when both times he healed after one month of the illness.

The Best Defense...

On March 11, 2015 Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica Inc. (BIVI) issued the first conventionally licensed vaccine for pigeon fever. It was said to be safe, pure, and demonstrate reasonable expectation efficiency. However, on April 9, 2015 a written statement from the company said it put a voluntary stop sale on the vaccine. It stated that it was "due to reports of unexpected post-vaccination gastrointestinal tract events observed in some horses. During the required pre-licensing safety studies, these events were not observed."

So much for a vaccine to solve all of our pigeon fever problems! The best way to keep your horse safe from pigeon fever is to keep your horse's immune system healthy, implement holistic fly control measures, maintain good sanitation, and avoid unnecessary environmental contamination by diseased horses. An active immune system is a horse's best defense against infection, and that is what differentiates horses who don't develop abscesses from those who do.

Parting Thoughts...

In conclusion, I hope neither you nor your horse experience pigeon fever. If it does happen to come your way, my suggestion is to take each moment at a time and welcome the opportunity to bond with your horse in a deeper fashion. Both times Comanche went through pigeon fever we became closer, and that was the silver lining behind the abhorrent episode. Once the wound was healed, the reward of seeing him galloping full speed across the pasture to rejoin his buddies was priceless and worth every diligent moment of nurse care! ☺☺

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About the author:

Tara Coyote lives in Nevada City, California and is an equine facilitated learning (EFL) instructor practicing the work of Linda Kohanov (www.Eponaquest.com) on her 10-acre ranch, Wind Horse Sanctuary, with her three horses. She offers monthly workshops and private sessions exploring the unique modality of self-awareness exercises with the horses as guides. For more information, please see www.windhorsesanctuary.com. She will be happy to never experience pigeon fever again!