

# “Not your average disease”: Horse owners’ understanding of exotic diseases and their associated risks



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## Background

The possibility of an exotic disease incursion is a significant concern for the United Kingdom (UK) equine industry. While horse owners are expected to prepare for an outbreak, little is known about their understanding of, or attitudes towards, exotic diseases.



## Our questions

1. How do horse owners understand the term ‘exotic disease’?
2. What attitudes do horse owners have towards their risk of exotic diseases?

## Methods

- 1 A cross-sectional study of the UK leisure horse sector was conducted between April and July 2018.
- 2 Participants (n = 423) completed an online questionnaire about their awareness and perceived risk of exotic diseases.
- 3 Patterns in the responses to 2 open-ended questions were identified using qualitative content analysis.

## Results: Understanding of exotic diseases



### Exotic diseases belong somewhere else

Exotic diseases were framed as not natively ‘ours’. Instead, they were associated with countries in Africa and tropical climates.



### Exotic diseases are dangerous

Exotic diseases were seen as unlike those experienced before. They were described as nasty, harmful, and serious.

## Results: Attitudes towards exotic disease risk



### Responsible owners prevent disease

A ‘responsible’ owner was aware of health hazards and took actions to protect their horse.

“ Although I personally am strict re: biosecurity, I don’t trust other livery’s are as stringent or think it’s a ‘big deal’ like I do. ”



### Owners need support from the industry

Participants relied on stakeholders to uphold disease prevention in the community.

“ Government is unlikely to assist in what are non-agricultural animals. Brexit may mean no cross-border agreements or controls. So no barriers to spread! ”



### Risk depends on proximity to the risky horse

Participants felt at ease when they were distant from ‘risky’ horses.

“ My county has a lot of dealers and ports so horses come in from the continent regularly not always in good condition and I always try to keep alert and manage smart. ”



### Some risk is inevitable

Some felt that exotic diseases were unavoidable despite doing everything in their power.

“ My care standards are high, but if it’s going to happen it will. ”

## Conclusions

- 1 Horse owners were confident in their own preventive measures, but worried about the effects of factors beyond their control.
- 2 Horse owners valued assurance from others about their willingness to prevent exotic diseases.
- 3 Efforts to improve preparedness should consider horse owners’ understanding of exotic diseases.

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