QUINE GRASS SICKNESS (EGS) is a condition that strikes fear among owners and vets alike, due to the high risk of fatalities and our limited ability to prevent the disease occurring.

Young adult horses are at greatest risk and the disease continues to represent a major threat to the Thoroughbred breeding industry, affecting broodmares and first-season stallions. Most famously, Dubai Millennium tragically lost his life due to EGS, and Mister Balley, after leaving Mark Johnston’s Kingsley House to stand at the National Stud, beat the odds to survive the disease, although EGS had a profound effect on his stud career. Mark is now an ambassador for the EGS Fund. After decades of research, there is now some hope for the future, as plans for a vaccine trial to prevent EGS move forwards.

About Equine Grass Sickness

Equine grass sickness is a debilitating and often fatal disease affecting horses, ponies and donkeys, with a mortality rate in excess of 85%. EGS was first described in eastern Scotland in the early 1900s, and Britain continues to have the highest incidence of EGS worldwide, affecting over 3% of the equine population in some areas. However, EGS also occurs in several northern European countries and an identical condition called mal seco has been recognised in Argentina, the Falklands, Colombia and Chile. In Britain, approximately one case occurs in every 50 horses and ponies residing on EGS-affected premises each year, and research demonstrates high-risk areas throughout Britain (Figure 1).
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directed away from the association between C. botulinum and EGS. Ninety years later, in collaboration with the EGS Fund and the universities of Edinburgh and Liverpool, the Animal Health Trust is co-ordinating a ground-breaking project to trial a modern vaccine against EGS in Britain.
In late 2011, manufacturers of a C. botulinum type C toxoid vaccine undertook a safety study. Following this safety study, the Animal Health Trust obtained an Animal Test Certificate from the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, authorising a pilot vaccine trial of this C. botulinum type C toxoid vaccine.
Involving five participating veterinary practices, the pilot vaccine trial commenced in October 2012, enrolling 95 horses/ponies from 10 EGS-affected premises in Scotland. Using computer-generated random numbers, the enrolled horses and ponies were assigned randomly to receive either the vaccine or an inactive placebo injection.
The primary vaccination course was completed in December 2012-January 2013 and a booster vaccination is scheduled for late spring 2013. Compliance of participating owners and veterinary practices has been excellent, and their feedback will be used to inform the design of a proposed nationwide vaccine trial.
The Animal Health Trust is currently conducting a feasibility study, surveying both horse-owners and veterinary surgeons in order to canvass opinion about such a trial. This study will be vital in identifying eligible premises for inclusion in the vaccine trial and results from the pilot and feasibility studies will be used to maximise efficiency of recruitment for both veterinary practices and horse owners in the nationwide vaccine trial.
Blood tests for quantifying antibody levels to C. Botulinum type C antigens are currently under development at the Animal Health Trust, with the project benefitting from additional expertise from EGS researchers at the universities of Edinburgh and Liverpool. These blood tests will be used to measure immune response to vaccination during the trial, and will provide further valuable information regarding the role of C. botulinum in causing EGS. EGS cannot be induced experimentally; therefore a field trial represents the only available method of evaluating the efficacy of vaccination in preventing the disease. While the preliminary pilot study will provide valuable information, a vaccine trial on a much greater scale is required to determine if the vaccine can prevent EGS.
Therefore, the Animal Health Trust, the EGS Fund and the universities of Edinburgh and Liverpool are working together to raise the funding required for the proposed two-year nationwide trial in Britain. It is anticipated this trial will begin in 2014, subject to funding.
If the vaccine is shown to be effective, it would be a major breakthrough in EGS prevention. An effective vaccine would represent the first preventive healthcare measure to reduce the impact of this devastating disease.

Help make EGS vaccination possible
Please help us to make this ground-breaking vaccine trial a reality. The EGS Fund is the only registered charity in the UK raising funds specifically for research into this devastating disease, and is spearheading a national fundraising campaign to support the EGS vaccine trial.
To register an interest in finding out more about participating, or for information on how to donate or help with fundraising for the nationwide EGS vaccine trial, please contact the EGS Fund:
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The launch of a pilot vaccine trial marked the start of a ground-breaking project to aid the prevention of EGS in Britain.
(Photo courtesy of the Animal Health Trust.)