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Understanding The Equine Medication Control Program

As show season ramps up, there's something every owner and rider needs to know before their horse goes through the in-gate – drug testing rules and the current list of permitted medications.

All horses and ponies competing in nationally sanctioned shows are subject to random drug testing in accordance with the Equine Medication Control Rules, which are intended to promote clean sport to ensure an equal playing field for participants, encourage horsemanship and protect the welfare of horses and ponies. It also accommodates legitimate therapy without inadvertently incurring an “adverse analytical finding,” more commonly referred to as a positive drug test.

Since the mid-1970s, Canada has had an active medication control program. In the early days, the program was not centralized and each province administered its own testing. In 2010, to assist Equine Canada and enable it to build the infrastructure necessary to assume the administration of the program, the Ontario Equestrian Federation volunteered to administer the program across the country. The result was a new national program, created by the Equine Canada Equine Medication Control Committee, which ushered in a single, comprehensive testing standard for equestrian sport in Canada.

In Ontario, the program continues to be administered by the OEF in accordance with Equine Canada rules. The OEF is responsible for hiring drug technicians to obtain samples, assigns those technicians to competitions identified by a selection committee and is accountable for the funds collected. Across the country, the target is to test 30 per cent of bronze shows, 40 per cent of silver shows and 70 per cent

of gold shows annually. FEI divisions at platinum competitions are also tested, according to FEI rules.

Ontario has four drug technicians attending shows. The attending technician is responsible for selecting horses or ponies for testing, as well as collecting and shipping samples. Horses and ponies are selected at random for testing throughout the competition at the technician's discretion. They can be tested more than once at a competition and are eligible for testing while on the grounds, even if they have withdrawn from the event.

There is a provision for emergency medication in the event that a horse or pony suffers an acute illness or injury and requires immediate treatment with a prohibited drug. Certain conditions must be met, including withdrawing the horse or pony from competition for at least 24 hours following administration of a drug, which must be administered by a veterinarian. An Emergency Medication Report must also be filed with the show steward, although it is not an automatic defense should the horse or pony undergo drug testing and test positive. If a drug is detected in the system of the horse or pony, the matter will be investigated with consideration given to the nature of the illness or injury, the treatment administered, the Emergency Medication Report on file and the drug detected in the sample.

Once a horse or pony is selected, the technician will escort it to a holding stall where a sample will be collected. A urine sample is preferred, although a blood sample may be obtained if a urine sample can't be collected and a vet is present to draw blood. An adult responsible for the horse or pony must be present during the test and sign off on the sample. Any refusal to submit a horse or pony for testing constitutes a violation of the Equine Medications Rules and is subject to penalties.

The sample, which is sealed, numbered and secured in a locked box, is then sent to Maxxam Analytics in British Columbia, a forensic toxicology laboratory that is inspected and monitored by the Canadian Pari-Mutuel Agency. Equine Canada is mandated to use this lab, which is the only lab in Canada approved to analyze Equine Canada samples. Samples are only identified by a number; no identifying information is provided.

Only those with positive tests will be contacted. Guidelines outlined by Equine Canada's Equine Medication Control Committee determine the nature and category of the offense. Depending on the offense, the person responsible for the horse or pony in question may have the option of accepting a suspension and paying a fine, or going to a hearing.

So who decides which substances are permitted? The Canadian Pari-Mutuel Agency, the federal agency responsible for the regulation of pari-mutuel betting at race tracks, operates an Equine Drug Control Surveillance Program to keep prohibited drugs and medicines off the track. Equine Canada has adopted its schedule of drugs from the agency, making exceptions for some permitted medications allowed at Equine Canada sanctioned competitions.

It's important to stay up-to-date on permitted medications. A complete list can be found on the Equine Canada website at www.equinecanada.ca. Remember, if it's not on the list of permitted medications, it is a prohibited substance. Everyone involved in showing a horse or pony, including the rider and owner (and the parent or guardian if either are under the age of 18 as of Jan. 1 of the competition year), needs to know what the animal is being fed and administered, the guidelines for use of permitted medications and withdrawal times. 🌟