Updated: July 2025

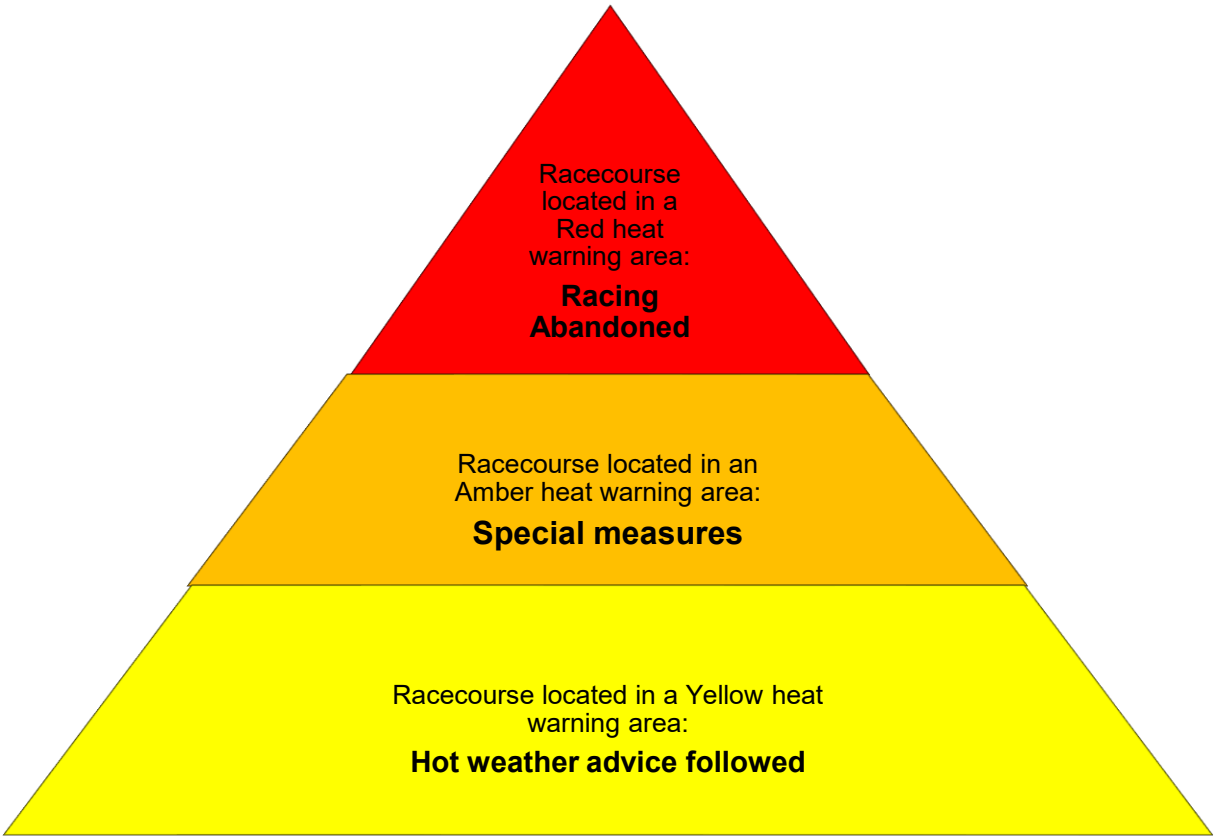
BRITISH HORSERACING AUTHORITY

HOT WEATHER POLICY

This policy sets out the British Horseracing Authority's (BHA) approach to managing race fixtures during periods of high and extreme heat. This aligns with Met Office extreme heat warnings.

The document also outlines the steps taken by the BHA, racecourses and officials to keep horses cool, comfortable and hydrated and reduce the risk of heat stress during hot weather.

BHA response to UK Government weather warnings for heat



Red heat warning

When the Met Office issues red warnings for heat in an area that contains a racecourse, the meeting will be abandoned.

In addition, trainers must not travel horses from or through areas that have red heat warnings.

If a red warning for heat is issued by the UK Government, the BHA's Director of Equine Regulation, Safety and Welfare will establish whether any race fixtures will be affected by the warning and inform the BHA's Chief Executive Officer. The CEO will decide whether the affected fixtures must be rearranged or abandoned.

The BHA will give as much notice as possible to changes made to the race programme, with consideration to the preparation and travel time required to attend the racecourse. The ongoing assessment of weather conditions and the impact on whether a race meeting should continue will be made by the local BHA stewards in conjunction with senior leaders from the raceday officials and equine regulation, safety and welfare departments.

In the event of the requirement for rearranged or abandonment, the following people will be informed:

1. Clerk(s) of the racecourse(s) affected
2. BHA raceday officials
3. Racecourse Association (RCA)
4. National Trainers Federation (NTF)
5. Professional Jockeys Association (PJA)
6. Racehorse Owners Association (ROA)
7. National Association of Racing Staff (NARS)

Note: Where rearrangement is not possible, the fixture will be abandoned as per BHAGI OPS 2.4. Rearrangement must be organised in conjunction with the BHA's relevant racing departments and in discussion with the Clerk of the Course.

Amber heat warning

Where amber heat warnings are issued, the clerk of the course/managing executive must contact the BHA Racing Department, their BHA Course Inspector and Veterinary Officer Liaison and the Senior Racecourse Veterinary Surgeon at the earliest opportunity to discuss mitigation of the risk of heat stress to horses and people. Potential interventions include:

- Altering race times and changing race order so that the races that carry the greatest risk of heat stress are scheduled at the times of day that present the lowest risk.
- Ensuring that there is adequate water provision. There must be sufficient water available in appropriate positions around the horse areas and it must be replenished between races. BHA General Instruction 12 gives the locations and minimum expected volumes of water. Clerks of course should consult with their Senior Racecourse Veterinary Surgeon and BHA Veterinary Officer.
- Ensuring that a dedicated, safe area is available for cooling horses, preferably in a relatively private place away from public attention. Ideally this would be grass but could be rubber and might be the racetrack.
- Ensuring sufficient people are available to assist in cooling horses.
- Minimising parade times.
- Unsaddling and removing headgear on course and cooling horses immediately.
- Prohibiting application of rugs or sheets to horses immediately after racing, even those that have been soaked in iced water.
- Ensuring every horse is assessed by a veterinary surgeon before entering the winner's enclosure or leaving for the racecourse stables.
- Considering the provision of shaded areas and/or fans for horses.

Where it is not possible to mitigate the risk of heat stress to horses to the satisfaction of the Veterinary Officer or Senior Racecourse Veterinary Surgeon, the Stewards must be informed and an enquiry held to decide whether the meeting is safe to run.

Yellow heat warning

When yellow weather warnings are issued, the BHA's Hot Weather Advice must be instigated:

Hot weather advice

BHA General Instructions outline the minimum expectation of water provision by racecourses in BHAGI 12.2 Annex C. This requirement must be available for each race. Explicitly:

i) Water provision should reflect the time of year, number of runners, ambient temperature and humidity, and length and type of racing.

ii) A minimum of 400L water (stored in open tanks or butts) and sufficient 10L buckets to apply the water should be in place in each of the following locations:

1) Stable Yard
2) Winner's Enclosure
3) Unsaddling
4) Pull Up

iii) Tanks and/or butts must be able to be re-filled between each race, or sufficient water must be stored to ensure replacement is available

iv) There must be provision of water for cooling on the horse walks

v) Mobile water of sufficient volume to manage an overheated horse must be available to reach any part of the course as required (400L is the recommended minimum volume)

vi) There must be at least one bucket in the unsaddling area per runner in each race.

vii) Water must be cool, ideally less than 15 degrees Celsius, to ensure adequate cooling is possible

viii) The Annual Risk Assessment should consider the management of overheated horses occurring in any of the horse areas.

HOT WEATHER PROCEDURES: GUIDANCE NOTES

Introduction

This outlines the British Horseracing Authority's (BHA) approach to managing horseracing during hot weather. Further information regarding water provision and hot weather guidance for racecourses can be found on the Members' Area of the Racecourse Association (RCA) website in the Veterinary Guidance documents folder and on the BHA website.

Thermoregulation of the Thoroughbred

Racehorses produce heat whilst they are galloping, which can result in a rise in body temperature at a rate of approximately 1°C per minute.

Heat loss is achieved through the skin and the respiratory tract via radiation, conduction, convection and evaporation. The primary mechanism for heat loss in the horse is through evaporation of sweat from the surface of the body. The efficiency of heat loss depends on the difference in temperature between the horse and the environment, on the rate of air movement across the skin and the humidity. Therefore, higher ambient temperatures, little or no wind or air movements and greater humidity can affect the horse's ability to lose heat and increase the risk of overheating.

Thoroughbred racehorses are able to acclimatise to changes in ambient temperature and humidity, but this takes several days to weeks to occur, and the extent and speed of this acclimatisation is dependent on the individual. Sudden increases in temperature and/ or humidity are associated with greater risk of overheating than more gradual increases.

Heat stress (also known as exertional heat illness or post-race ataxia)

Heat Stress is a clinical disorder in which heat accumulation results in an excessive increase in the horse's core body temperature.

Clinical signs can include lethargy, anxiety, violent kicking, ataxia (wobbliness) and collapse, and are most frequently observed after strenuous exercise but can be seen in any circumstances that heat gain exceeds normal core temperature range. Left untreated, heat stress can result in coma and death. Heat stress is a welfare concern for the horse, and it can also be dangerous for the handlers and other persons in the vicinity, as affected horses can become difficult to manage. Heat stress can be a distressing condition to observe, particularly for the general public.

It is therefore incumbent on the BHA, racecourses, trainers, stable staff, jockeys and veterinary surgeons to minimise the risk that horses will suffer from heat stress and to ensure that any horses showing clinical signs are treated promptly and appropriately.

Prevention

Prevention of heat stress relies on horses being able to cool adequately. This can be facilitated through reducing heat acquisition, for example, minimising exposure to direct sunlight, ensuring stabling is cool and by aiding heat loss such as through application of cold water and by providing air flow across the skin. The colder the water, the more heat will be lost from the body. Racecourses should aim to provide water at temperatures of less than 15 degrees for cooling.

The more air flow across the skin the more heat will be lost as well. Air flow can be created by walking the horse and by using fans. Cooling horses after travel and before exercise can help prevent the core temperature rising too high and the horse developing signs of heat stress. It is

important that horses are not put onto lorries or back into stables until they are dry, as leaving a wet horse in a confined area without air flow will result in an increase in humidity and a reduced ability to lose heat.

Treatment

If signs of heat stress occur, the horse should be treated through repeated application of cold water until the signs resolve completely and the horse is cool to the touch. Cooling is most effectively achieved by steady application of water over the horse's neck and trunk and, where safe to do so, walking the horse to create air flow over the skin.

If walking a horse, care should be taken to ensure that the ground surface is safe (e.g. rubber, grass) to reduce slipping and injury should the horse fall, and that horses should not be taken far from the water source used for cooling. Smaller volumes of water that are easily lifted to above the horse's shoulders and hindquarters and poured in a controlled fashion are more effective than larger, heavier volumes that are thrown at the horse.

Sweat scrapers should not be used when cooling horses as they slow the application of water and therefore reduce heat loss per unit of time. Repeated application of cold water displaces the water on the horse that has heated through contact with the horse's skin. Some horses benefit from the administration of medication by a veterinary surgeon to aid management of the problem.

When ambient temperatures are high, extra measures should be implemented to help prevent heat stress. These can include:

- travelling at cooler times of day,
- increasing the amount of space allocated to each horse/travelling fewer horses in each compartment of the transporter
- maximising airflow within the horse compartment of the transporter
- monitoring the temperature within the horse compartment and aiming to keep it stable and below 25 degrees Celsius, with a maximum of 18 degrees being more suitable
- considering not rugging during travel/ stabling unless the conditions require it
- ensuring that adequate drinking water is available at all times or, when travelling, stopping to offer water at least every 4.5 hours
- parking in the shade where possible
- cooling regularly throughout the day and prior to racing
- minimising exposure to direct sunlight
- keeping 'warm-ups' and parades to the minimum
- dismounting and removing saddles and headgear immediately on finishing the race
- immediate application of cold water over the entire body on cessation of exercise – cold water application, even if it is iced (0-5 degrees Celsius), is not detrimental to horses post-exercise and must be actively encouraged to prevent heat stress. It does not cause shock, muscle damage or tying up
- shaded areas for cooling off and fans to increase the movement of air over the horses
- ensuring that horses have cooled properly before putting them back into stables or loading to take home as either can cause re-heating and delayed heat stress

The use of sweat scrapers reduces the rate of cooling in horses and they should not be used when trying to reduce horse's body temperature.

The use of sweat sheets, wet rugs and cooling blankets is not recommended when trying to cool a horse as they act as an insulating layer and reduce the ability for the horse to lose heat.

Travel during hot weather

The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) guidelines state that if you do not have a temperature-controlled vehicle you should not transport animals in temperatures over 30 degrees and you should check the 'feels' like temperature for the intended route if the humidity is high. During periods of hot weather, trainers and transporters should consider government guidelines for travelling.

These recommendations include making contingency plans with consideration for the management of major delays on the route. It is imperative that there is plenty of water available for both horses and people on the transport and that horses are travelled at cooler times of day. Reducing the number of horses on a vehicle improves airflow and reduces heat generation and must be considered.

Stabling in hot weather

Racecourses should consider the type of stabling available and manage conditions to minimise temperatures. Strategies that will reduce the risk of horses becoming too hot include ensuring adequate ventilation in stables, opening stable doors on the morning of racing to allow air circulation, allocating the coolest stables first and providing sufficient cooling facilities, shaded areas and/or fans. Racecourses that often race in hot weather should consider providing fans or power points for trainers to provide fans within the stables to aid cooling.

Management of race meetings experiencing sudden increases in ambient temperature

Sudden increases in ambient temperature cause an increased risk of heat stress in horses due to the lack of acclimatisation. If there is a sudden increase in temperature of greater than 10 degrees Celsius, in the week before the race meeting, Clerks should invoke their hot weather protocols and mitigation as described in the Amber Weather Warning section of this document. Sudden increases in temperature can be particularly problematic in the spring and officials should be particularly mindful of this. If there is any doubt as to whether or not the race meeting can safely go ahead, the Stewards must be informed and an enquiry held.

Rules

The following Rules are relevant to the prevention and treatment of heat stress in horses:

- Rule H1: Licensed Persons must comply with instructions given by BHA Officials.
- Rule D1: The Responsible Person must take all reasonable steps to ensure the safety and welfare of every horse in their care at all times.
- Rule D3.2: The Responsible Person must obtain and follow advice from a veterinary surgeon as to the appropriate treatment for a horse affected by injury or disease.

More information

For any questions, please contact: equine@britishhorseracing.com.