

Skin Conditions in Horses

Skin Conditions in Horses: What to Look For

When it comes to our beloved horses, skin conditions can pop up for a variety of reasons. That's why it's essential to keep a close eye on their skin every day. The earlier you catch any issues, the easier they are to treat!

Important: If you notice anything unusual about your horse's skin, don't hesitate to reach out to your vet for guidance. They're your best resource for managing your horse's health.

Ringworm: A Sneaky Fungal Infection



One of the more common skin issues is ringworm, a contagious infection caused by a type of fungus found in the soil. It often spreads among horses, especially when they roll around in the dirt or lie down, and it can even hitch a ride on grooming tools or fencing. This makes it crucial to practice good hygiene.

How to Spot Ringworm:

It starts with little tufts of raised hair, which eventually fall out, leaving behind round, weeping wounds. These wounds can show up anywhere, but they often appear on your horse's head, neck, and around the saddle or girth area.

If you suspect ringworm, it's best to isolate your horse from others and give your vet a call right away.

Treating Ringworm:

Quick action is key! Your vet might recommend an anti-fungal shampoo, spray, or cream to tackle the infection. And remember, wearing disposable gloves while treating your horse can help protect you from catching it, too.

Preventing Spread:

To stop ringworm from spreading:

- Keep your horse away from others.
- Wear protective clothing and gloves.
- Avoid sharing rugs or grooming tools.
- Don't ride your horse until the sores have healed to prevent further irritation.
- Dispose of bedding and thoroughly clean the stable and equipment with a fungicidal disinfectant.



Sweet Itch: An Allergic Reaction

Sweet itch, or summer seasonal recurrent dermatitis, is another skin issue that can trouble horses, particularly from March to November when pesky midges and mosquitoes are buzzing around. It's essentially an allergic reaction to these insects' bites and can be particularly bothersome for horses that are prone to it.

Symptoms of Sweet Itch:

If your horse is suffering, you might notice:

- Intense itching, especially along their back, mane, and tail.
- Hair loss or sore patches from excessive rubbing.

- Crusty or broken skin around the neck and back.
- Increased tail swishing or biting at their skin to relieve the itch.

Your horse might also seem more irritable or lethargic when ridden. If you suspect sweet itch, it's time to schedule a visit with your vet.

Managing Sweet Itch:

While there's no outright cure for sweet itch, your vet can suggest treatments to help manage it. Here are a few strategies you can employ:

- **Sweet Itch Rugs:** These specially designed rugs cover your horse from head to tail, keeping those pesky midges at bay.
- **Insect Repellent:** Applying a good insect repellent can deter the little buggers, but avoid it on sore or broken skin.
- **Timing is Everything:** Keep your horse stabled or sheltered during peak midge activity—usually at dawn and dusk.
- **Electric Fans:** Installing fans in the stable can help, as midges struggle to fly against strong winds.
- **Grazing Wisely:** Choose dry, open areas for grazing, steering clear of moist spots near water.
- **Clean Up:** Regularly picking up manure will help minimise the warm, moist environment that attracts midges.
- **Soothing Shampoos:** A gentle, anti-itch shampoo can provide relief; just check with your vet for recommendations.



Lice and Mites: Tiny Trouble-Makers

Mites and lice can also be the culprits behind your horse's itching. There are two types of lice: bloodsucking and biting, both of which are small, wingless, and brown. You won't catch them affecting humans, but they can cause a lot of discomfort for your horse.

Signs of Lice:

Keep an eye out for:

- Restlessness or irritability.
- A dull coat and excessive scratching.
- Visible lice or eggs, especially in the mane or tail.
- Bald spots from overgrooming.

Treating Lice:

Your vet can help you choose the best treatment—this usually involves sprays, shampoos, or powders to eliminate the lice. Treatment typically needs to be repeated after about three weeks to catch any new hatchlings.



Feather Mites: Hidden Pests

Feather mites, also known as chorioptic mites, love to hang out in the hair around your horse's lower legs, particularly in those with long feathers. Although you can't see them, they can cause some annoying flakes of dry skin, often referred to as "walking dandruff."

Symptoms of Feather Mites:

You might notice:

- Excessive stamping of hooves.
- Reluctance to have their feet picked up.
- Scratching or biting at their legs.
- Flaky, scruffy skin.

If ignored, feather mites can lead to a lot of discomfort, so it's best to get your vet involved early.

Treating Feather Mites:

Your vet may suggest a topical treatment, an injectable wormer, or an oral paste. Clipping the feathers can also help make treatments more effective.



Mud Fever: A Winter Woe

Mud fever is a frustrating, non-contagious skin condition that typically affects your horse's lower legs, especially during wet winter months. When the bacteria that causes it gets into waterlogged skin, it leads to painful scabs and infections.

Symptoms of Mud Fever:

Look for:

- Crusty scabs above the hooves.
- Thick discharge between the scabs and the skin.
- Broken or cracked skin and swelling in severe cases.

- Painful, hot legs.

In extreme cases, it can even spread up the legs. Horses with white legs tend to be more susceptible.

Treating Mud Fever:

If you spot signs of mud fever, your vet will work with you on a treatment plan, which may involve gently removing scabs and keeping the area clean and dry. It's much easier to prevent mud fever than to treat it, so keeping an eye on wet conditions is key!

Rain Scald: A Similar Threat



Similar to mud fever, rain scald is a bacterial skin infection that can affect your horse's neck, back, and hindquarters. It happens when your horse's coat gets consistently wet, softening the skin underneath.

Symptoms of Rain Scald:

Watch for:

- Small painful scabs that resemble scald marks.
- Scabs that pull away with tufts of hair.

Treating Rain Scald:

If you suspect rain scald, your vet will want to rule out other infections like ringworm first. Treatment may involve daily cleaning with a diluted antibacterial solution, and if severe, antibiotics might be necessary.

Keeping your horse healthy involves vigilance and a bit of knowledge about these common skin conditions. Regular check-ups and a proactive approach can make all the difference in ensuring your horse remains happy and healthy!