

Mud Fever

As many of you will know, over the winter months when the paddocks get very wet, mud fever can infect your horse. The proper name for mud fever is pastern dermatitis and it is caused by bacteria, which thrive in muddy wet conditions. There are a few other ways of getting mud fever including friction from boots, sweating and mites. The bacteria can live up to 42 months in the removed scabs so make sure they are removed and disinfect your equipment after mud fever.



Horse skin is an ideal place for many bacterial organisms, as well as fungi and other parasites to grow. They live on healthy skin, gaining nourishment from natural waste matter and causing no harm or active infection. But, if the skin is injured or damaged the balance between horse and bacteria gets skewed towards the

bacteria. The bacteria can enter the horse's body through broken skin, and from there it will grow in the damp, warm skin layers, starting an active infection. The most common place for mud fever is the back of the heel and pastern. It usually looks like crusty scabs. There may also be a discharge and the area may feel extra warm. If a horse stamps their feet in discomfort or itching this maybe a sign of mid fever or mites.

Causes of mud fever

Some soil types seem to predispose horses to these infections. This may explain why several animals on the same pasture become affected. Here are some factors to think about:

- Prolonged damp and not too cold
- Standing in deep mud or soiled bedding
- Constantly washing before and/or after work without fully drying them afterwards
- Excessive sweating under rugs or tack
- Skin trauma, such as rubbing from overreach boots or incorrectly fitted bandages, chaffing from artificial surfaces such as sand, or too strong grooming

Some horses with mud fever will be suffering from infestations of tiny mites, similar to those that cause human scabies. This is most common in horses with long hair around their hooves or lower legs. The condition is often called heel mange. Fungal infections can also be responsible for skin damage.

Signs of mud fever

The signs of mud fever are fairly classic and easy to recognise, with the distribution of the lesions reflecting the areas that have been subjected to continued wetting and trauma.

- Matted areas of hair containing crusty scabs
- Small, circular, ulcerated, moist lesions beneath scabs
- Thick, creamy, white, yellow or greenish discharge
- Removed scab typically has a round underside with the hair roots protruding
- Eventual hair loss leaving raw-looking, inflamed skin underneath
- When found on the front legs it can be mistaken for over-reach injuries
- Heat, swelling and pain on pressure of the leg
- Possible lameness
- Mud fever can occur on other parts of the body, especially the back, when it is called rain scald
- If severely affected, lethargy, depression and loss of appetite

Mud fever treatment

Keeping the skin clean and dry is the basis of treating the condition. This may only be possible if the horse is removed from the wet and mud and kept stabled for some time. There are many different treatments for mud fever and if your horse has mud fever it would be wise to talk to your local vet about it.

Preventing mud fever

- Once the infection is established, stabling may be the only option until the skin is healed.
- Avoid over-washing and/or too vigorous grooming
- If bandaging or putting on boots, ensure legs are clean and dry first
- Periodically disinfect all equipment, gear and stable surfaces
- Consider nutritional supplements for promoting a healthy skin, such as soya/cod liver oils, seaweed (not for pregnant mares), antioxidants, herbs and essential oils such as lavender, camomile and yarrow
- Rotate paddocks
- Use electric fencing to block off muddy areas around gates
- Be vigilant. The sooner you spot the first tell-tale signs of mud fever, the quicker you can take action. Always check your horse's legs when you bring them in and make sure that they are clear of any signs of mud fever. If the horse is muddy then the only way to do this, maybe to hose off the legs to check them.