

Winter ailments

Words by Matt Hanks, BVSc MRCVS from Central Equine Vets

Winter may be a distant memory but you don't need me to tell you that it will be here again all too soon. There are certain conditions that we see more often in the winter months, so here's what to look out for as the colder months return.

Intestinal parasites

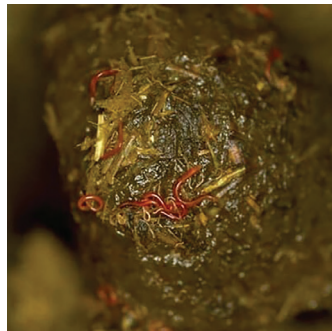
Vets will wax lyrical about the benefits of faecal egg testing horses. The main parasite that we are trying to control are a group of worms called Cyathostomes. These parasites have a complicated life cycle that involves burrowing into the lining of your horse's intestines and become encysted. They can sit there for years and can emerge en masse to cause serious problems. While faecal egg counting can tell you which horses have the greatest burden of intestinal parasites, the worms that have already burrowed into the lining of the gut do not produce eggs and so are not counted during an egg count. To avoid a horse having a large burden of encysted worms, we make sure that at least once per year, after the first heavy frost, we use a wormer that is able to remove these parasites. This is a very important step in the parasite programme of your horse. We would give this wormer regardless of the number eggs seen on a faecal egg count.

Dentistry

Everyone knows the importance of good dentistry in your horse, but during winter, teeth are used to eat stored forage in the form of hay or haylage rather than soft grass. Eating hay or haylage can exacerbate conditions such as diastema, a gap between



Clipping the lower limbs can remove the environment preferred by the mite



Cyathostomes (red worms) on faeces

teeth in which impacted food can cause pain, and very worn teeth. Horses with dental issues should have a check-up to make sure that everything is as good as they can be. Diastema may be able to be widened or diet can be altered to reduce gum inflammation and damage.

Mites and lice

With longer hair growing during the winter, external parasites can become problematic. Native horses with feathers on their legs are commonly affected

by Chorioptic mange (feather mites). This will manifest itself by your horse scratching and biting at their pasterns and fetlocks. Mites cannot be seen with the naked eye, but you can see signs of their presence with horses developing scabbing at the pasterns and behind the front knees. Mites only really affect the legs of horses (sometimes the face). There are no licensed treatments for mites in the horse, so we select products designed either for cats and dogs or cattle to treat this irritation condition. Clipping the lower limbs can often help because this removes the environment preferred by the mite.



Magnified image of a feather mite



Mud fever showing the raw skin after scabbing has been removed

Lice are a very different parasite to mites. They affect the body (occasionally the legs) of a horse. Horses can become very itchy with lice and can be seen rubbing and scraping their flanks with their teeth. Unlike mites, lice can be seen with the naked eye, so it is quite easy to make a diagnosis. Treatment is usually straightforward using an anti-lice treatment. Personally, I find the diluted liquid treatments to work the best.

Mud fever

With wetter weather comes mud. With mud comes mud fever. Mud fever is actually a bacterial disease that thrives in wet conditions and can cause disease almost anywhere on the body.

If lesions are on the body we call it 'rainscald' but on the legs we call it 'mud fever'. The bacteria gain entry to the skin as the skin becomes damaged with constant moisture. The scabs that we see are due more to the horse's reaction to the bacteria. Treatment involves washing with Chlorhexidine (Hibiscrub) and removing the scabs, rinsing the area well and keeping the area dry. Antibacterial creams can be applied but the best treatment is removing the horse from the wet/muddy environment. If this is not possible then the condition can be very hard to treat.



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