

# Skin Health in Horses

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**S**kin is the largest organ of the body. It's a vital covering that breathes and protects against bacteria, viruses and fungus that attack it every second of every day. It has to flex and bend, control temperature, produce warm hair during the winter and be totally waterproof.

Dermatology is the study of skin conditions, and there are literally thousands of things that can affect your horse's skin. Here are a few that might bother your horse during the winter months.

## Mud Fever/Rain Scald

This is a very common ailment that is thought to be caused by a bacteria called *dermatophilus congolensis*. Once the skin is damaged, other bacteria and fungus also invade the area to cause hair loss and scabbing.

When the condition is seen on the legs, we call it mud fever. When it affects the rest of the body, we call it rain scald. The same organism causes the two conditions.

The bacteria enjoys a wet environment and it is constant moisture that damages the horse's skin and allows the bacteria to invade.

With mud fever on the legs, it is the areas of pink skin (seen as white hair) that get affected most. In badly affected horses, black legs can also get affected. The horse will develop thick, painful scabs on the leg. Other bacteria like *Streps* or *Staphs* also may enter the damaged skin and cause a cellulitis/lymphangitis causing lameness and the entire leg to swell.

Rain scald can affect any colour skin. It's mostly seen in areas that

stay wet the longest. Examples are under long manes, under the belly where rain has ran down and on the back when a wet rug has been left on. The hair comes off in what we call 'paint-brush lesions' but rarely gets infected by other bacteria, so often just looks like scabbing with hair loss.

Treatment for mud fever and rain scald involves washing with an antiseptic wash and removing the scabs. It is important to rinse soap off with clean water and dry thoroughly. Some antiseptic creams can be used, but best results are achieved by removing the horse from the wet. If you leave your horse's legs to get wet, results to treatment can be poor. Similarly, prevention is hard if your horse stays in the same wet environment. Some people use Vaseline or various oils and there are commercial products that claim to prevent mud fever.

## Mites

Years ago we hardly saw horses affected by mites but today we see horses every week scratching, stamping and biting at their lower legs. Scabs similar to mud fever can develop. Some horses also get flaky skin behind their knees. Mites mostly affect horses with 'feathers' rather than fine haired types, but any horse can develop an allergy to a mite bite.

Despite preferring the legs, mites can spread to the head as the horse uses its teeth to scratch its legs. So a horse with bald patches on its face may have leg mites. There are no licensed treatments for horse mites in the UK so we have to use cattle or cat and dog products to try to treat them. If your horse has feathers, clip them off as mites like the dark, warm, moist environment of deep hair. Some people use oil



Multiple sarcoids on the chest

with sulphur, but I have seen lots of failures with this treatment. If your horse is scratching its legs, call your vet as it may require some 'off label' treatment.

## Lice

Very common in winter, lice can be seen with the naked eye and are easy to treat. Horses may show hair loss around the head, neck and upper thigh. The best treatment is a wash as this gets deep into the coat. Powders tend to sit on top of the coat. Treat high between the legs and under the mane as these warm, dark areas are ideal for lice.

## Sarcoids

If your horse has a lump or mass that is affecting the skin get it checked by your vet. Sarcoids are (mostly) benign tumours of the skin. They are 'contagious' between horses that get sarcoids and are commonly spread by biting flies. They appear in summer and grow in winter. There are five main types of sarcoids and they are all difficult and expensive to treat; recurrence is likely. Early treatment gives the best results.

## Ringworm

Quite common in younger horses, ringworm is a self limiting disease, meaning it eventually



Scabbing and raw skin from mud fever



Ringworm on the face

disappears by itself. It is caused by a fungus and can be passed to humans. There are two closely related fungus that can cause ringworm, *Trichophyton* and *Microsporum*. The fungus feeds on the hair and the top layer of skin causes bald, round lesions that heal from the middle. Horses are often undeterred by having the condition, but some can be itchy or the hairless round lesions can appear inflamed. Treatment is using an anti-fungal wash. The response may appear slow, but after a few treatments the condition is less contagious.

Remember to treat all rugs and blankets as they can harbour the fungus. The incubation period for ringworm varies but is between a few days to one month.

Skin is a complex organ and should not be taken for granted. If you have any concerns about your horse's skin, call your vet.



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