

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



COMMON AILMENTS



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Even with the best of care, horses can suffer from occasional bouts of ill health, injury or related conditions. The role of a horse keeper is to reduce the risk of common ailments occurring, to recognise signs that a horse is unwell or injured, and to take measures to ensure that the horse receives appropriate treatment.



Skin conditions

Ringworm

This is a contagious fungal infection of the skin that spreads by direct and indirect contact, so infected horses should be isolated wherever possible, strict hygiene measures should be adopted and veterinary advice sought. Infection shows initially as tufts of raised hair, which eventually fall off, leaving weeping lesions.

Often circular in shape, these lesions may vary in size and density, and usually occur around the head, neck, saddle and girth regions. The horse's immediate environment also becomes infected, so bedding material should be destroyed and the stable, plus all tack, and equipment should be washed thoroughly with a fungicidal disinfectant.

Rainscald

Rainscald is a skin infection caused by a softening of the skin following persistent saturation. This can occur in horses that have a weakened immunity or are already in poor condition and lack the natural grease in their coat to keep warm and dry. It can also occur when leaking or non-breathable turnout rugs are used, when there is poor air circulation under the rug and when the horse's back is constantly getting wet with moisture from rain or sweat.

An affected horse may show patchy hair loss along the back and quarters. The hair can become matted, and the skin may develop sores and weeping lesions. To prevent a horse from getting rainscald, ensure that it always has access to shelter from the field and that rugs are of a correct type for the conditions and maintained accordingly.

Mudfever

This is a skin condition usually associated with wet and muddy conditions. The skin of the legs and the stomach become inflamed and scaly and, in severe cases, the horse may develop a high temperature or fever. The infection is caused by bacteria that enters the waterlogged skin and causes scabs to form, sealing in the infection.

Always ensure that the legs are cleaned well after work or time in the field. Either wash off and then ensure that the legs are properly dried or



leave the mud to dry and then brush it off with a soft brush. If the horse has clipped legs, it is a good idea to apply a barrier cream to prevent the skin from becoming water logged.

Cracked heels

These are caused by the same conditions as mud fever. It is advisable to keep the legs and stomach as clean and dry as possible, and applying a protective cream might also help. Extra care is needed when dealing with heels because they are close to the ground and therefore more susceptible to becoming waterlogged. Always ensure that legs are cleaned well after work or time in the field.



Sweet itch

Sweet itch is an inflammation of the skin as a result of an allergic reaction, which is also called Summer Seasonal Recurrent Dermatitis (SSRD). It is caused by a biting midge called *Culicoides*, and the itching is caused by an allergic reaction to the saliva of the female midge. In most cases the horse will become itchy along the back, especially around the mane and tail. In extreme cases, the horse can rub itself raw trying to relieve the itching.

Susceptible horses usually develop the condition for the first time as youngsters and, once it has occurred, the horse will continue to suffer from it (although environmental conditions play a large part in whether a horse will show signs or not).

Control of sweet itch

Apply an insect repellent regularly, but be careful that the horse does not develop a reaction. The skin of a horse with sweet itch is usually sensitive and repellents are not suitable if the skin is sore or broken. Veterinary advice should be sought.

Midges are most active at dawn and dusk, and on mild, humid and still days, so keeping the horse in the stable or under shelter during this time will help to minimise biting.

Midges are attracted to areas of decomposing vegetation found in woodland and near to water. It is therefore better to graze affected horses in drier, open areas.

Special sweet itch rugs can be bought that cover the horse from poll to tail to stop the midges getting access to the skin and to protect from rubbing. These can be useful as they can be worn in or out of the stable.



Respiratory conditions

Common Cold

This is usually indicated by white or yellow discharge from the nose. The horse may have a slightly higher temperature than usual and glands in the throat may become swollen. It is usually caused by a viral infection contracted by contact with other infected horses. Horses may become more susceptible if they are kept in a badly ventilated stable or lorry for long periods of time. Horses often catch colds if they are competing at shows, due to the close proximity of other horses from different areas of the country.

It is important to call the veterinary surgeon immediately and keep the horse isolated as the virus can spread to other horses. Keep the horse warm and in a well-ventilated, dust-free area. Try to feed with soft food that is easy to swallow and well-soaked hay. Try not to let the horse drink from public water troughs at competitions, and always take your own water supply.

Cough

There are three main types of coughs that occur in horses. The first is associated with a common cold and normally starts with the occasional cough accompanied by a watery discharge from the nose. Then, after approximately two weeks, the discharge will change colour to white or yellow and the cough will increase in frequency.

The other two types are coughs caused by a viral or bacterial infection, and coughs as an allergic reaction (usually to dust). If the horse is stabled, ensure that bedding is dust free (either wood or paper shavings), all hay has been soaked, and that the stable is well ventilated.

If a horse has a cough, the animal must stop working unless advised otherwise by the veterinary surgeon. It is also advisable to keep the horse away from others until the type of cough has been established, as types one and two can be infectious.

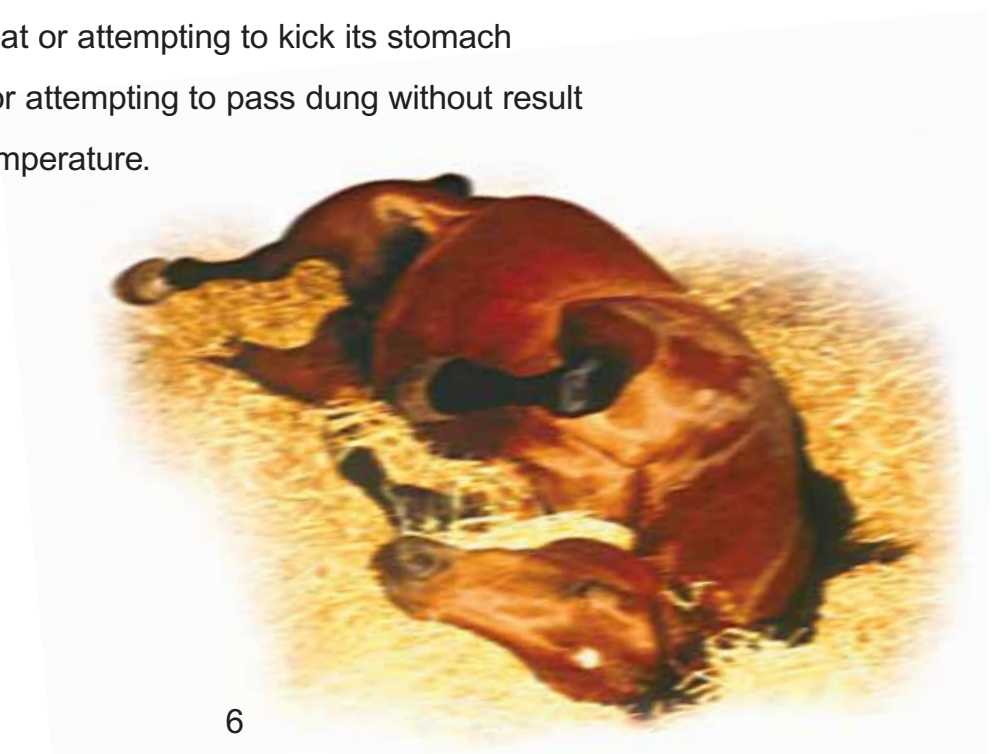
Other conditions

Colic

Colic is the term used to describe abdominal pain. It can indicate a problem with the gut itself or other organs within the abdomen. There are many causes of colic, ranging from simple indigestion to a serious twisted gut. In all cases of suspected colic, immediate veterinary advice should be sought.

Signs of colic include:

- a restless horse, pawing at the ground or attempting to roll excessively
- unexplained sweating and rapid or laboured breathing
- unusually irritable, looking at or attempting to kick its stomach
- stretching as if to urinate or attempting to pass dung without result
- elevated pulse rate and temperature.



Laminitis

This is a painful and debilitating condition. Prevention is always better than cure as, when not treated quickly or correctly, it can cause permanent damage, which may result in euthanasia. Horses in a “fat body” condition are more prone to laminitis and similar metabolic disorders.

Signs of acute (sudden and severe) laminitis include:

- increased digital pulse in the lower limb
- lame with an inability or reluctance to walk or move
- lying down and displaying an unwillingness to get up
- rocking back onto heels when standing, limbs out stretched
- leaning back onto hind feet to relieve pressure from the front feet.

Laminitis can be very serious and early veterinary attention is essential.



Related Blue Cross publications

All of the leaflets in The Blue Cross *All About Pets* series contain information and advice regarding the prevention, identification and treatment of a range of ailments commonly affecting the horse and should be read by anyone considering taking on the responsibility of keeping a horse.

The following leaflets from the *All About Pets* series may be useful.

- *Routine healthcare (H8)*
- *Colic: prevention and management (H13)*
- *Laminitis (H14)*
- *Obesity: prevention and management (H15)*

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All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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