

LEGCARE

Not so glorious....Mud

Wet, muddy winters are never something that horseowners look forward to, and at this time of year whether it's the miseries of mud fever or looking after tired legs after exercise, they'll need you to provide the solution.

What is mud fever?

Mud fever is the name given to a relatively common skin condition that many horses and ponies get, particularly during winter and early spring. It is usually the lower limbs that are affected, mainly the pasterns and heel area of the hind legs, but the upper leg, underneath the belly, the hindquarters and in some cases the neck area can also be affected. When this condition occurs on the upper body it is known as rain scald. Mud fever can look a little like dried mud, as the skin becomes inflamed and crusty and painful sores and scabs appear from the oozing serum. In severe cases these can make the horse lame.

Signs of mud fever

- Matted areas of hair with crusty scabs
- Small moist sores under the scabs
- Thick, white yellow or greenish discharge
- Hair loss leaving raw-looking inflamed skin
- Heat, swelling and pain on pressure or flexion of the leg
- Possible lameness



Picture courtesy of Equilibrium Products

What causes mud fever?

Mud fever is caused by an infection of the skin by the bacteria *Dermatophilus congolensis*. Under normal circumstances the skin acts as a protective barrier, preventing the bacterium from entering the horse's system and doing any damage. However, the skin can become compromised by regular contact with mud, cold and wet. The continual wetting of the skin causes a breakdown of the protective barrier of the epidermis or outer layer of skin, allowing the bacterium to enter and

do its worst.

Horses and ponies standing for hours in muddy, wet paddocks and at gates are a common sight during the winter months and early spring. It is in these conditions of repeated immersion in mud or persistent wetting of the skin that mud fever thrives. Generally, those horses and ponies with white socks are more prone to the condition, as are those with thin skins and heavier horses with thick feathers around the fetlock, but mud fever can affect horses of all breeds, ages and colours. There appears to be a lot of individual variation in susceptibility to mud fever, with some horses being repeatedly re-infected, while others on the same yard, kept in the same conditions, may be unaffected.

As with any bacterial infection, mud fever can become a very serious condition very quickly. The legs can become swollen and sore and open sores can become infected in no time. Often, the level of damage to the skin is such that these open sores can become very difficult to heal and can result in proud skin, permanent hair loss and in severe cases the need for skin grafts.

How can it be prevented?

As always, prevention is better than cure, particularly as mud fever can often be difficult and time-consuming to treat.

Good stable management -

Ensure bedding is clean, dry and non-irritant at all times. If bandaging, make sure limbs are clean and dry first.

Good paddock maintenance -

Wet muddy fields make the problem worse, so as soon as paddocks start to become wet and muddy preventive action will be required. If possible, paddocks should be rotated to avoid horses having to stand in wet, muddy ground. Electric fencing can be used to prevent horses from standing for long periods in the deep mud in gateways and, if possible, good quality hardcore should be used in areas that get a lot of use.

Cleaning and grooming -

Hosing the horse's legs should be avoided. It is better to allow the mud to dry and then gently brush off with a soft bristled brush. If a hose is used the legs should be gently dried with a soft,



clean, dry towel afterwards. The horse's legs should be checked regularly and at the first sign of soreness, weeping or scabs they

should be treated to avoid the problem getting any worse.

Easidri provides an alternative to conventional towel drying after washing and helps remove water quickly and efficiently.

Looking like a towel but

absorbent like a sponge, it makes drying awkward areas like heels and pasterns easier.

Barrier Creams

There are many products available to help protect the skin from the constant wet by forming a barrier between the mud and the leg. Many experienced owners will use a good quality nappy rash cream such as 'Sudocrem', or even Vaseline, while others have their particular equestrian favourites such as tea tree oil, sulphur, MSM, aloe vera, calendula and hypericum, goose grease or branded products such as Mud-X cream (from Global Herbs).

Muddy Marvel barrier cream from Net-tex is another water resistant barrier cream which inhibits the actions of mud, water



Picture courtesy of Equilibrium Products

and bacteria, yet allows the skin to breathe. It also soothes, disinfects and assists in skin re-growth, providing waterproof protection for up to seven days. Mud Block Lotion from Equi-mins has been specially developed for those with horses who have feathering round the leg as it gets to the parts where it is needed the most. Colloidal silver which is held in suspension in the lotion using electrolysis, has proven to be very effective at killing off bacterial infections and has also had great results when tested on mud fever. Equi-mins also produce a Mud Block Ointment and Cream, allowing customers to choose a treatment that matches their needs.



Waterproof leg wraps

One drawback of barrier creams is that the horse's legs are still covered in mud when they come in from the field. Boots such as Equi-Chaps from Equilibrium Products are one way of keeping a horse's legs clean and dry and helping to prevent mud fever. These chaps encase the horse's lower leg in a breathable fabric, fitting well down over the hoof and under the heel to keep legs warm, dry and mud free.

Tired and weary

Caring for tired legs

The legs are the most vulnerable structure of the horse and yet they must withstand enormous pressures and forces of impact during training and competition. Not surprising then that there is an extensive selection of leg care products to cater

for sprains, bruises and muscle soreness as well as to prevent injuries and cool hot legs after strenuous exercise. These products help refresh and revive tired legs and 'tighten' them to prevent swelling. Gels for use on bruises, strained joints and muscles soreness contain various ingredients with different influences on the horse's body. Commonly used ingredients are: arnica to help to maintain local blood supply, witch hazel to help inflamed and tender skin, MSM for skin recovery and allantoin for cell renewal. Leg cooling gels are popular for use after training or exercise, as are leg clays. These clay poultices may be used on knees, tendons, shins, and fetlocks and help to cool and tighten hot and tired legs. They are often used after fast work such as galloping or cross country. Many are ready to use straight from the tub and are easy to apply. Most of these do not need to be covered with wraps or bandages, though to prolong the effect, legs can be wrapped over with moistened brown paper or cling film and bandaged. They can be used as part of the daily routine to care for and maintain legs or applied as necessary throughout training and after competition. Other products act by generating heat rather than cooling. Designed to help reduce muscle tension and inflammation on tired joints, products such as the Net-Tex Lynn Russell joint & muscle rejuvenator can be gently massaged in all over the body including the leg area to help after strenuous exercise.

Supplements

Various supplements are available such as soya/cod liver oils, seaweed, anti-oxidants, herbs and essential oils such as lavender, camomile and yarrow which promote a healthy coat and skin condition making the horse more resistant to mud fever. The new 'Think Mud' from Brinicombe Equine is a nutritional supplement to support skin integrity when at risk from the harmful effects of bacteria in mud. The plant extracts and isoflavonoids have a positive effect on the

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immune system, combined with nutrients such as MSM and zinc to support healthy skin. Also available is Mud-X from Global Herbs, in either powder and liquid form, which contains plant chemicals to cleanse and protect the skin, and Mud Gard from NAF.

What about the horse that already has it?

If a horse has got mud fever he should be kept out of the wet and mud as much as possible. Sometimes this is only possible by stabling the horse for some time. In severe cases a vet should be consulted. For any treatment to work it must reach under the scabs, so these must be lifted and removed from the start. This can be very painful for the horse, and in severe cases may require sedation. Initially hair should be clipped away from the infected area. Then an anti-bacterial shampoo, Hibiscrub surgical scrub, or iodine wash

Hosing the horse's legs should be avoided

should be used, softening the scabs and allowing them to be gently removed. Products such as Muddy Marvel De-Scab from Net-tex are specifically designed to assist the lifting of scabs prior to eliminating bacterial infections that lay underneath. Whatever is used for this should then be rinsed off and the leg dried well, with a hair-drier if possible. Once removed, an anti-bacterial cream or lotion can be liberally applied, making sure that the skin is kept clean and dry. The affected area must continue to be protected while new skin and hair grow. Bandaging the leg can help keep it clean and dry but only if the skin has been properly dealt with first and the correct bandaging technique is used. If bandages are too tight or moisture is trapped underneath it can allow an infection to flare up again.

