

Mud Fever Advice and Fact Sheet



TOR EQUINE
VETERINARY PRACTICE

What is Mud Fever?

Mud fever is a painful skin condition for horses and a frustrating experience for the owner. The disease is caused by bacteria called *Dermatophilus Congolensis* that live in the soil, *Staphylococcus* and *Streptococcus* bacteria can also have a secondary role in mud fever but can also be present naturally on normal skin in low numbers. *Dermatophilus* is an opportunistic invader causing infection only when the skin is damaged or the normal protective barriers are reduced or deficient. We see a higher incidence of mud fever during winter as the bacteria are suited to wet and muddy conditions. When the skin is in good health and the bacteria quantities are low, there is not usually a problem but the majority of mud fever cases warrant Veterinary attention.

What does Mud fever look like?

The legs, more commonly hindlimbs, affected with mud fever can become swollen and the skin can look inflamed (reddened), this can make the horse very uncomfortable and sensitive over the affected areas. Scabs may appear on the legs, which may ooze serum or bleed when removed. Hair loss can also occur. The horse may present lame, especially if lymphangitis/cellulitis occurs as a complication of the disease. Some horses are more susceptible than others; we see a higher incidence in legs with white socks.

The bacteria that cause mud fever are also responsible for the conditions known as Greasy Heel, Cracked heels and Rainscald.



Why do horses get it?

Skin is a natural protective barrier which is made up of many layers, if the skin becomes damaged, bacteria that are usually harmless or commensal reach deeper layers of the skin and multiply causing infection and inflammation.

My horse seems prone to mud fever?

Whilst some horses seem to suffer from mud fever every year, others do not seem to be greatly affected. In some cases, there can be underlying issues that may make some horses more susceptible to mud fever.

- White limbs are commonly more affected and this is because some white socks may have photosensitisation where the sunlight (even sunlight in the winter) can cause irritation in the skin, leading to a break in the skin's integrity.
- Horses that have Cushing's Disease often fail to respond to first line treatment of mud fever due to suppression of the horse's immune response.
- Chorioptic mange also known as chorioptic feather mites can cause intense irritation, especially in the heavier breeds. Horses scratching, rubbing and biting at their legs will create lesions that develop secondary bacterial infections. A simple to use topical mite wash is available from Tor Equine.
- Leukocytoclastic vasculitis is a condition where small vessels become inflamed, the lesions seen with this condition can present very similar to mud fever but treatment is different.

How can you prevent mud fever?

- The main way to prevent mud fever is limiting exposure to the bacteria and avoiding prolonged contact with wet and muddy conditions, although we accept this is rather challenging in Devon in the winter!
- It is essential to keep the legs dry. Due to the bacteria liking wet and muddy conditions, we advise not washing the legs excessively. If the mud is dry it is best brushed off using a soft, non-abrasive brush.
- If you feel you must wash the legs, then dry really well with a towel afterwards.
- Avoid turn out in extremely muddy paddocks, if this is unavoidable then turnout leg guards can be used. With difficult cases it may be necessary to keep the horse in, until it is under control. Rotating paddocks or turn out on an alternative surface can avoid poaching of fields.
- Barrier creams can be useful in preventing contact of mud/wet with the skin and can make it easier to brush/wipe mud off the legs.
- Clipping the legs will help you spot mud fever earlier and allow the legs to dry more quickly, however feathers often provide a natural barrier to the mud.

How can you treat it?

If your horse is already suffering with mud fever then there are a few things you can do to treat it;

- Clip the hair away from the scabs and area, this will allow topical treatments to have better penetration and enable you to keep the legs dry.
- The legs often become scabby under which bacteria can survive for prolonged periods. Gentle removal of the scabs is essential, usually following the prior application of an emollient to soften them. Picking at scabs often promotes further inflammation and pain.
- Although we strongly recommend not over washing the legs, the first time you notice Mud Fever washing with antibacterial shampoo such as Hibiscrub or Malaseb will help. Ensure the shampoo has 10-minute contact time before washing off and drying the legs thoroughly. Over-use of Hibiscrub will damage the normal healthy bacteria of the skin and potentially prolong the problem.
- Once legs are dry apply topical antibiotic cream such as Tor Equine Mud Fever Cream – please note Richard or Meisha will need to see your horse before prescribing this cream.
- In particularly tricky cases, injectable or oral systemic antibiotics may be needed especially if secondary conditions like lymphangitis or cellulitis have occurred.



Above: Lymphangitis secondary to Mudfever



For any persistent cases or if you suspect underlying conditions that will need additional treatment, please book in a visit for further workup with Richard or Meisha who will be more than happy to answer any questions and support you throughout the treatment.