



Massey University

Veterinary Teaching Hospital

MUD FEVER

Cause

Mud fever is caused by an organism called 'Dermatophilus congolensis' (Dermatophilus meaning "skin loving"). This organism is a bacteria, although in many ways it is similar to a fungus. It lives in the soil and can survive from year to year. The bacteria cannot penetrate normal healthy skin. However, in the winter, rain and mud soften the skin. Continual wetting and drying will cause the skin to chap and the bacteria are able to enter the skin. Here the bacteria multiply and cause the characteristic symptoms. Hence muddy conditions are not always necessary to cause mud fever. Anything, which breaks the skin, such as a scratch or graze, can also allow bacteria access.

Symptoms

Mud fever can be recognised by matted hair, crusty exudate and scabs that form on the legs of the horse. It is usually seen around the coronet, heels and pastern, although scabs may form higher up the legs as well and even on to the belly. It is more common on white legs with pink skin and in horses with more feather.

In severe cases the bacteria will penetrate right through the skin and multiply underneath it. This results in the leg swelling up and the horse may become lame.

Treatment

Treatment of mud fever must be vigorous and immediate. First of all it is important to remove all the scabs and exudate from the area as these harbour the bacteria. This is best achieved by using a dilute antiseptic solution, such as Pevidine, Hibiscrub or Malaseb shampoo to soften the scabs and to clean right down to pink healthy skin. Initially, poulticing may be required to soften the scabs. Afterwards it is important that the leg is very thoroughly dried.

Once the scabs have been removed, an antibiotic cream such as Dermobion should be applied twice daily; the scabs will reform rapidly, so it will be necessary to repeat the antiseptic wash daily.

If the leg becomes swollen or lame a course of antibiotics may be necessary as well. In these cases the horse should be examined and treated by a vet.

It is often very difficult to completely eradicate mud fever, so rigorously applying antibiotic cream and cleaning the scabs away must continue until the legs are completely healed. A close check should be kept for any signs of mud fever recurring.

Aftercare

After the mud fever has gone the skin is often very tender, so applying a soothing cream such as zinc and castor oil may be beneficial.

Obviously it is better if the horse does not get mud fever in the first place. If the horse has muddy legs, they should be allowed to dry and the mud brushed off. This is better than washing the legs every day because however thoroughly the skin is dried, it will still tend to chap.

If the horse acquires minor scabs on the legs, a close watch should be kept on these to ensure they do not develop into mud fever.