

It all looks like ‘Mud Fever’ to me!

Skin whether equine or other species has only a few methods of reaction against damage, hence many conditions can appear at first sight to look extremely similar.

‘Mud Fever’ is one of the commonest skin infections especially in the autumn and winter. It is caused by a bacteria – ‘Dermatophilus Congolensis’ and causes the skin to exude serum which matts the hair together with scab formation and as the hair falls out it leaves hairless areas with open sores and the hair looks like the end of a miniature paint brush.

Mud is not the cause however moisture is!

Keeping the horse in dry conditions will help prevent the disease and also speed recovery. The horse is not itchy though can be depressed with a poor appetite.

It commonly affects the lower legs but the bacteria can affect the head and back where the condition is known as ‘Weatherbeat’ and is caused by sweating under rugs and having a soaked coat with no opportunity to dry it out in a stable / field shelter. Sometimes the white areas seem to be affected more and occasionally the condition is made worse by sunlight. ‘Photosenstisation’ however is a separate condition – see below.

Treatment is aimed at removing the scabs and crusts using warm antiseptic solutions, e.g. Chlorhexidine or povidone iodine. Gentle soaking will remove most of the infected debris. Sometimes we use local antibiotics or even injectable ones , so if your horse doesn’t respond to washes – phone your vet for advice. Clean and disinfect grooming equipment to prevent transmission from 1 horse to another.

Mud Fever is rarely painful as it only affects the surface of the skin but it can be frustrating to clear up in some cases. If the horse is painful it is likely that the infection has penetrated to a deeper layer of the skin causing inflammation/infection of the hair root.and the primary cause may be a Staphloccocus bacterium. These are pus producers and the hair matts together but the scabs and crusts are difficult to remove and may requie sedation. The last case I saw took me 45 minutes to clip the legs under sedation and remove the scabs. Putting lotions and potions on top of crusts and scabs doesn’t get them to the skin level where they are needed. It’s a bit like having a shower with your clothes on!



Ringworm is relatively rare and is caused by a group of fungi. They attack the hair shaft itself causing it to become brittle and break off so the first sign is areas of hair loss, initially in a circle but as the lesions progress and coalesce they can form any shape. Sometimes the area is itchy and sometimes not. Treatments limit the infective nature of the disease and thereby safeguard your other horses but do not shorten the course except by killing spores and preventing reinfection. Stables and tack need to be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected with a sporicidal product. E.g. Virkon or the diluted products we use on the horse - Imaverol, Mycophyt.



Photosensitisation – occurs where ultra violet light reacts with a photodynamic substance in the skin to cause a super sunburn. Usually St John's Wort is eaten and this is the initiating factor but some medicines can cause the condition and horses with liver disease allow phyloerythrin to accumulate in the skin instead of detoxifying it. Stable the horse and call your vet.



Here the white areas are crusty and sore just like severe sunburn.

Insect bites can get infected and look similar to both Mud Fever and allergies i.e. Urticaria.