

Q&A

HORSECARE

OUR EXPERT PANEL



BECKY LEES
Becky is an experienced vet who enjoys all aspects of equine medicine. She is vet advisor to Nettex. In her spare time, Becky rides her horse, Markie.



CLARE BARFOOT
Clare is a registered equine nutritionist who is the research and development manager for Spillers Horse Feeds. Visit: www.spillers-feeds.com.



MARK TABACHNIK
Vet Mark is an equine partner at Wright & Moreton in Cheshire, a member practice of XL Equine. He has a specific interest in equine dentistry.

Mud fever confusion

Q I have two cobs that both suffer from mud fever, but whereas one has dry scabs the other has lesions which become really gooey. Why is this?

Joy Brent, by email

BECKY SAYS Mud fever is a bacterial skin infection affecting the lower legs, in areas subjected to continued wetting and trauma.

Signs of mud fever are classic. Hair is matted and contains crusty scabs, which when removed have moist lesions underneath. There may also be a thick, creamy, white or yellow discharge.

The discharge on one of your cobs contains the bacteria that cause mud fever and it sounds like this horse is more affected than your other cob.

This can be due to many reasons, such as the number of bacteria involved, the size of the affected area, thickness of the skin and the horse's own immune system.



Mud fever causes crusty scabs and sometimes a discharge

However, treatment for both cobs should be identical, starting by removing the scabs.

This can be done using dilute chlorhexidine in warm water, or a product that's designed to soften firmly attached scabs, so they can be gently removed.

A mild disinfectant then needs to be applied to get rid of the bacteria. Chlorhexidine-based products are ideal for this, and then the legs should be dried.

This needs to be repeated until the mud fever has completely cleared up.

White hairs are a worry

Q White hairs have appeared on my horse's withers. Could this have been caused by my saddle?

Phoebe Dale, Shrewsbury, Shrops

MARK SAYS This is called 'leukotrichia', and is caused by a loss of the pigment melanin.

Melanin usually causes the dark colouring of hair. When it's lost, although the hair may grow as normal, it will be white.

It can have many causes. For example, it is a part of the normal aging process around the muzzle and eyes of older horses. Other causes can be chemical injury, or somewhat rarely, following injections.

In your case, the likely cause is pressure under the saddle, but possible contact allergies with numnahs have been reported. The condition is generally not associated with itchininess or underlying diseases.

Leukotrichia is a cosmetic disease. There are no treatments available, but it is unlikely to cause future problems.

However, consult a qualified saddle fitter to check your tack is not causing your horse any discomfort or physical issues.



Saddle pressure can cause white hairs to appear

Should I feed linseed?

Q My ex-racer is in light work and I feed her hay and a low-calorie horse and pony cube. Someone commented that she's looking 'ribby' and I should add linseed to her feed. Is that a good idea?

Sharon Evans, by email

CLARE SAYS If you think your mare needs extra condition there are several steps you can take. Firstly, you need to eliminate any health issues and have her teeth checked.

Once you have satisfied yourself that all is well, ensure you are feeding enough quality forage and the recommended amount of horse and pony cubes.

If not, increase her feed to around 3kg to 4kg per day. If you are already feeding the amount recommended on the bag, you could switch to a product that is higher in energy.

With an ex-racehorse, it is important to keep her temperament calm. I suggest choosing a feed based on slow-release energy sources, such as fibre and oil. These will either come in a chopped fibre form or as cubes, often designed for competition use.

You can add in linseed, a high oil extrusion or vegetable oil but it is important you address the base diet first.

Linseed can add condition, but check the base diet first

What is this lump?

Q After a day's hunting, which involved jumping some hedges, my horse has developed a hard lump on the front of his leg, at the top. My yard manager said it could be a thorn – if so, how can I get it out?

Selina Taylor, Glasgow

MARK SAYS Be careful – the only person who should diagnose a condition in your horse is a vet. That's what we're trained and qualified for. Advice from well-meaning people is never a substitute for this, no matter how well intentioned it may be.

There are many things a 'hard lump' could be. The first thing a vet would do is see which anatomical structures the lump is associated with – is it near a tendon perhaps, or a muscle?

Then we'd think about what's underneath it and how surrounding tissues have been affected.

Bone, for example, would produce a very hard swelling, whereas reacting scar tissue might be a little softer. Other useful clues are if the lump is painful to the touch or has a discharge.

A thorn injury might expect to have an entry hole, or a discharging tract, and painful, reactive swelling around it.

We would be likely to trot the horse up to see if he was lame, or whether his gait was affected.

The nature of the lump still might not be clear on a single examination, in which case we could consider ultrasound scans or x-rays to provide a more accurate diagnosis.

After this, I'd be hopeful we would have a good idea of how to treat the problem.

I would certainly not advocate trying to encourage a possible thorn out without firm evidence there is one present in the first place.

If you are worried about a lump, get it checked by a vet

TIP from the TOP

Keep the barn tidy and save on hay, by picking up any loose bits after you've filled nets – as long as it's clean and dry you can still feed it to your horse.

Why has he had diarrhoea?

Q My veteran has suffered diarrhoea on and off since the weather got colder. Now the grass has gone he's on a diet of hay and high fibre cubes. Can you help?

Tim Ford, by email

MARK SAYS Common reasons for a horse suffering from diarrhoea may be poor teeth – which can prevent a veteran from properly chewing his feed – or worms. Your horse should be on a regular worming programme and you can also have a worm egg count performed on a sample of his droppings.



Worm egg counts can give owners peace of mind

Can some horses be fussy?

Q I've been trying to find the right diet for a new horse, but she refuses to eat certain products. I thought all horses would eat anything!

Wendy Twitchen, by email

CLARE SAYS Horses are like people and have individual tastes and preferences.

Most horses, and especially ponies, are not particularly discerning when it comes to food but some are fussier.

In this situation it is a case of trial and error until you find something they will eat.

There are, however, different things you can try to encourage your horse to leave a nice clean bowl. These include finely chopping apples, carrots or other root vegetables, mixing in some



Add carrots or apples to the diet of a fussy eater

molassed sugar beet or apple juice or mixing in a spice, such as fenugreek.

Fenugreek has been shown to encourage intake although it does have a strong smell.

Horses absorb a lot of water in their large intestines. If this organ is diseased, it may not absorb as much water, causing it to come out in the droppings as diarrhoea.

There are many types of inflammatory bowel disease which affect horses, and this can be investigated by your vet.

They might suggest a blood sample to look at plasma proteins, which can commonly be lost by diseased bowels.

In the meantime, a bland diet is a sensible first step, but remember to add a feed balancer to provide minerals and vitamins, which may otherwise be missing.

If veterinary investigations come back clear, you may like to seek advice from an equine nutritionist.