

Melanomas explained



A form of skin cancer that commonly affects grey horses, melanomas are often benign, but nevertheless a worry for owners. Vet Paul Smith explains the latest on this condition

The condition

A form of skin cancer, melanomas are commonly found in grey, white and cremello horses of any breed or sex, especially as they hit their mid-teens.

Melanomas can be divided into three main types - dermal melanomas, which are the most common; melanocytic naevi, which tend to affect younger horses, and malignant melanomas, which are the rarest form and also the most aggressive.

While melanomas have long been regarded as nothing more than unsightly,

benign lumps - and more than 95% of cases are benign, at least when first diagnosed - there's a growing body of evidence to suggest that some have the potential to become malignant. It is now thought that a significant proportion (30-60%) will spread to other areas of the body, including the horse's internal organs.

In light of this, it's important that any cancerous lumps are correctly identified and monitored by a vet.

Melanomas often affect grey horses and can strike anywhere on the body, including the eyelids



Symptoms & diagnosis

The size and colour of your horse's lump, or lumps, will vary depending on the type of melanoma.

Dermal melanomas usually affect greys who are aged between 13 and 17, and often grow in multiples around the horse's anus, sheath, vulva or eyelids. These slow-growing lumps can appear as pigmented lumps or firm masses under the skin, and may ooze a black residue.

Malignant melanomas can occur in any colour horse, but again are far more common in grey and light-coloured animals.

They tend to develop in the same places as dermal melanomas, but are faster growing and often ulcerate to show a grey or grey-pink coloured surface. The most aggressive form of the disease and their ability to

spread to the horse's internal organs can lead to weight loss, colic, respiratory problems and neurological signs, such as difficulty swallowing.

Melanocytic naevi are the rarest kind of tumour and are unusual in that they affect younger horses - usually greys and coloured horses from birth up to the age of eight. They often develop as single lumps on the legs, neck, body and face.

Your horse's age and type, as well as the appearance and location of any tumours, can all be useful in helping your vet to determine which type of melanoma he is suffering with.

If your vet is in any doubt about the true nature of the lumps, a diagnosis can be confirmed by removing the tumour or sending a section of it away for microscopic examination.

Prevention

Sadly there's no way to prevent your horse from developing a melanoma, and if he's grey or light coloured the chances are he'll be affected at some point in his life by one or more lumps.

If your horse is lucky, this may simply be a one-off, slow-growing, benign melanoma that doesn't cause him any



Check your horse regularly for lumps

problems, or he may be unlucky enough to suffer a cluster of fast-growing, aggressive lumps - sadly, there's no way to tell, and nothing you can do to stop them developing in the first place.

Some people have suggested that keeping your horse out of direct sunlight during the hottest parts of the day, or

applying sunscreen, may help prevent melanomas forming. However, this assumes the disease is the same in horses as it is in humans, and this isn't the case. Solar radiation is unlikely to be the cause of the problem. It's also impractical to keep a horse out of the sun, or apply sunscreen in such bulk!

Treatment

Single, smaller lumps of all three types can be surgically removed, either via traditional methods or laser surgery, depending on where they are.

Malignant melanomas, in particular, should be removed with some urgency as once they've spread internally treatment becomes impossible.

Many melanomas, particularly those

around the anus and vulva, can be easily removed under standing sedation. Larger lesions, or those around the sheath or face, may need to be removed under general anaesthetic.

Tumours that have become too big to remove surgically, or which are in an awkward place, can be treated

using cryotherapy. This involves freezing the tumour to reduce its size and slow its growth.

A new technique involves injecting chemotherapy agents into the lumps, and this has proven successful in some cases. Cimetidine, an oral antacid, has also been shown to slow the rate of growth, though results have been varied.



Some isolated lumps can be removed using laser surgery

Melanomas: the key facts

- ✓ Although single, isolated melanomas may not cause your horse a problem or affect him being ridden and worked as normal, it's important to get your vet involved and ask his advice. Leaving a melanoma of any type untreated can be a risky strategy, so chat through the options with your vet.
- ✓ They may be the most common type - and often remain benign for years - but dermal melanomas can grow as large as 20cm and usually occur in clusters.
- ✓ Grey horses are particularly susceptible to melanomas, and it's estimated that up to 80% of greys over the age of 12 will be affected by this form of skin cancer.



A single, isolated melanoma may not affect the way your horse is ridden or worked

CALL THE VET!

If your horse develops a lump, or a cluster of lumps, and you're worried it may be a melanoma, ask your vet to investigate further. 📞