

Thrush explained



With more wet weather upon us, know your thrush facts so you can prevent this infection occurring before you have to treat it, with advice from XLEquine vet **David Rutherford**

PHOTO: BOB LANGRISH



Thrush is an infection of a horse's frog

The condition

Thrush is an unpleasant bacterial infection which affects the horse's frog, frog grooves and heel region.

It's caused by a variety of bacteria and fungi, with one particularly aggressive species of bacteria called *Fusobacterium necrophorum* being commonly involved. When these nasty bacteria become trapped in the crevices of the horse's hoof, they



PHOTO: © BECKIE MABBUT

Good hoof care can prevent thrush

invade and destroy the frog, and the infection may affect one or more feet. It is more commonly found in the hind feet, or if you horse has deep and narrow frog clefts.

A healthy frog requires the foot to land slightly heel first, so that it can engage with the ground, acting as a pump to push blood back up the horse's leg. Thrush is therefore a problem not

only because it's painful but also because it can reduce the frog's ability to function as necessary. If left unchecked, thrush can even cause permanent damage to the internal hoof structures. Thrush is usually (but not always) the result of horses being kept in wet and dirty ground conditions.

Symptoms & diagnosis

A horse suffering from thrush may well be lame with a foul-smelling, slimy, dark discharge around his frog's clefts and central crack.

Pressing down on the frog with your thumb will often cause pain if your horse is suffering from the infection and the frog itself may be growing abnormally with loose rubbery flaps.

In severe cases, the offending

bacteria may have eaten away at the frog to cause open sores into the deeper sensitive tissues. Occasionally swelling will extend up the lower part of the leg to the knee or hock.

The condition is usually recognised by your vet or farrier on these signs alone, but occasionally biopsies may need to be taken of the frog tissue to determine that thrush is the problem.

Heel cracks may indicate that your horse could have or be prone to thrush while soft and tender heels can also be an indicator. It's also important to note that thrush doesn't just pop up out of nowhere one day - it can have been festering for weeks or months, so checking your horse's feet daily and knowing what's normal for him is key to spotting it early.



Vet diagnoses may be necessary

Prevention

Maintaining good hoof hygiene and balance is vital in preventing thrush.

The hoof and frog become soft and crumbly, allowing the bacteria and fungi to penetrate and establish themselves, leading to infection. Wet and muddy fields, or soiled damp bedding, are particular culprits, with deep litter-style bedding being among the worst. For these reasons, thrush is

more common in winter than summer.

Prevention is, of course, better than cure so picking out your horse's feet properly twice a day and maintaining clean dry bedding is essential. It can be difficult during the wetter months but avoiding having your horse standing in a badly poached field for long periods is important. In addition, regular trimming of hooves and frog by a farrier



Wet, muddy fields can cause thrush

or hoof care practitioner is important to maintain good hoof conformation and frog health. Using an antiseptic wash, such as 2.5% iodine solution (available from good tack shops or online), to scrub out the hooves once a month is also a good idea. It's difficult to clean feet shod with bar shoes, and impossible under sole pads, putting horses who wear them at an increased risk of thrush.

Treatment

If left untreated, a thrush infection will progress and may affect the deeper structures within the foot causing serious distortion of the frog, and ongoing lameness, so quick treatment is key.

Bar shoes and pads should be removed and the frog, its grooves and the sole trimmed and paired back to visually healthy tissue by a vet or farrier, allowing air to reach the

affected tissue. The foot should then be picked out carefully twice daily before scrubbing the frog and sole with iodine solution to clean it and kill any fungi. Once you've washed out the affected feet, stand your horse on a clean, dry concrete area until they are dry. Then apply antibiotic spray (such as Cyclo Spray, available from your vet) to the frog and sole to help kill bacteria.

It's vital your horse is kept in a clean dry stable where hygiene is maintained during the treatment period. Painkillers may be given by mouth if he's lame, but antibiotic powders are rarely required. Tetanus cover must be given to an unvaccinated horse. This regime should be maintained until the feet are back to normal, which takes two to three weeks, sometimes longer.



Apply disinfectant spray to clean soles

Thrush: more key facts

- ✓ Some horses can be really susceptible to thrush, despite their owners' excellent stable management
- ✓ Don't confuse thrush with wounds to the frog as these can easily be caused by sharp objects and become infected
- ✓ Consider using a hoof care product with antibacterial ingredients. Visit www.silverfeet.com for more information about their hoof balm products

Make sure you keep your horse's bedding dry to help prevent thrush



Call the vet

If your horse's infection is severe and long standing, it's time to call the vet. The infection may have penetrated deep into the foot and a complete resection of the frog under general anaesthesia may be necessary. 🐾