

Help! What's Wrong with My Horse's Skin?

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Skin diseases are very common in horses and it is important to be aware of some of the most common things that you might see and how they might be treated. Skin diseases can be very uncomfortable for your horse, can be spread to other horses (or yourself!) and can be very cosmetically marring. (Skin tumors will not be covered in this article but include things like melanomas, squamous cell carcinomas and sarcoids.)

Rainrot is caused by the bacteria *Dermatophilus congolensis*, an organism that loves warm, moist environments. If your horse has rainrot, you may see scabby crusts and areas of hair loss. Common areas where you may see these lesions are on your horse's girth area or back. Keeping your horse well groomed can help prevent rainrot. Trimming or clipping the hair in the affected region will help to dry the area and speed healing. Removing the scabby crusts and bathing your horse daily with a betadine or chlorhexadine solution for 1-2 weeks is usually sufficient to clear up the infection.

Ringworm is a fungal infection that is most commonly observed on your horse's neck or face, although it can be anywhere. These lesions are usually circular with a very well demarcated border. They are hairless and crusty. It is very transmissible between horses, people and other animals. Because you can get ringworm from your horse, wear gloves if you will be touching him and wash your hands well immediately after contact. Bathing the area with a betadine or chlorhexadine solution and/or using an antifungal cream can help to hasten resolution of the infection. It is important to disinfect anything that has come in contact with your horse while he has been infected.

Scratches is a generic term for a bacterial or fungal infection that can be seen on the back of the pastern region. Excess moisture (mud, wet grass, etc.) makes a prime environment for scratches to develop. Because scratches is most often seen on white legs, there is some thought that sun exposure on the pink skin can cause damage and excessively dry out the skin in this area, which can also predispose your horse to scratches. The area is often quite painful and scabs, cracking and swelling can be seen. Treatment consists of trimming the hair in the affected region,



removing the scabs and treating the bacterial or fungal infection. As long as the scabs and crusts are present, your horse is still infected. Betadine or chlorhexadine scrub can be useful for killing any bacteria or fungus on the skin and for soaking off stubborn scabs. There are many different topical creams and products available for treating scratches. Because there can be several different causes for scratches, not all products may work on your horse and it may be necessary to switch to something else if you are not seeing improvement with treatment. If your horse is prone to developing scratches, it may be necessary to keep his legs wrapped to keep them dry, to keep them out of contact with irritating weeds (i.e. buttercups) and to minimize sun exposure.

Lice infestation is most often seen as areas of hair loss and dry, waxy crusts. Often if you look closely at your horse's hair you can see the lice, which will appear as little white flecks that resemble dandruff. Lice can be very itchy and can easily spread between horses. Infection usually responds well to several days of treatment with a lice powder containing permethrin or a similar product. A 1% selenium sulfide shampoo can be very effective at removing the lice as well. It is important to thoroughly clean all objects (including horse trailers) that have come in contact with your horse while he was infected.

Mange is an infection caused by mites, a parasite that often burrows into the feathered areas of the legs. It can occasionally be seen in other areas of the horse's body as well. It is especially common in draft horses. Mange is extremely itchy and affected horses may stomp their feet and chew at their legs. Many scabs are present, and a secondary bacterial infection and/or a thickening of the skin may also occur. If you look closely, you may be able to see the mites, which are tiny and clear to yellow-orange in appearance.

Treatment consists of deworming with ivermectin or moxidectin every 2-3 weeks until resolved, as well as topical application of organophosphate insecticides or a lime-sulfur solution. Topical treatment needs to be repeated every 2 weeks for at least 3-4 treatments

Pinworms are often the culprit if your horse has an extremely itchy tail and is rubbing his tail hairs out. A few other potential causes for tail itching are lice, mites or gnat hypersensitivity. Adult pinworms lay eggs near your horse's anus and this causes intense itching. Treatment is deworming with ivermectin, moxidectin, benzimidazoles or pyrantel pamoate. Bathing the tail head with a betadine or chlorhexadine scrub may also help to alleviate itching and treat any secondary bacterial or fungal infection. In some cases, corticosteroids may be needed to help alleviate the itching.

If your horse has **allergies**, he may develop bumps on his skin, hives or sensitive areas. He may also be itchy and rub his body on fences, you or other objects. Some horses with allergies also develop heaves or difficulty breathing. Environmental allergies can be caused by hay, grass, trees, weeds, pollen and dust. Soaking your horse's hay before feeding it may help to remove some of the allergens from it. Depending on what your horse is allergic to, he may do better outside or he may do better inside. It takes some experimentation to figure out where he will be most comfortable. Antihistamines work in some cases to minimize the allergic reaction. Corticosteroids or non-steroidal anti-inflammatories like 'Bute' (phenylbutazone) or 'Banamine' (flunixin meglumine) may be needed to help make your horse more comfortable. It can be helpful to try to figure out what your horse may be allergic to and to minimize exposure to it.

Insect bite hypersensitivity is a condition in which your horse is allergic to the saliva of gnats, midges or other insects. This condition is extremely itchy and areas of hair loss, oozy sores or scabs can be seen. Treatment consists of using insect repellents, keeping horses indoors at dawn and dusk when the insects are worse and using fly sheets and face masks. Corticosteroids or non-steroidal anti-inflammatories like 'Bute' (phenylbutazone) or 'Banamine' (flunixin meglumine) may be helpful for relieving itchiness and reactions to bites.

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If your horse has pink skin, he may develop photosensitivity or sunburn. This will appear as reddened or purple discolorations of the pink areas of your horse's skin. The skin may also develop scabs or become thickened. There are certain plants that increase your horse's sensitivity to the sun and these include: buckwheat, clover, St. John's wort, certain wood preservatives, ragwort and fiddleneck. Some medications can also increase your horse's sensitivity to the sun. Treatment consists of shielding affected areas of skin from sunlight with wraps or sheets and applying zinc oxide ointment to affected areas.

Aural plaques are white, flaky lesions that appear inside your horse's ear. They are caused by a papillomavirus and can be

aggravated by biting flies. Many times they seem to cause no problems and are left untreated, but in other cases, horses may develop ear sensitivity or head shyness. Aldara (Imiquimod 5%) is a topical cream that has been recently developed for treating aural plaques and has shown very good results. It works by stimulating a local inflammatory response to encourage the body to rid itself of the plaques. It is applied 2-3x/week every other week for 3 months on average. Keeping ear covers or a fly mask with ear covers on your horse can help to stop the progression of aural plaques.

Warts are a common finding in young horses. They are caused by the papillomavirus. Warts are most commonly seen on the muzzle and are white to gray, raised knobby lesions. They are usually painless and

cause the horse no discomfort. Warts are spread by contact with an infected horse or contaminated equipment. Warts usually resolve and disappear on their own over time, but can be pinched off, frozen or surgically removed to improve appearance and speed healing.

If you suspect that your horse has one of these conditions, contact your local veterinarian. There are more skin conditions than this article describes, but these are some of the most commonly seen conditions. Your veterinarian may recognize your horse's condition easily by its appearance and be able to recommend treatment. If your horse's skin condition isn't readily recognizable or is not responding to treatment, skin scrapings or biopsies can be taken for microscopic examination or culture.