

Summer Sores

With summer comes a hoard of irritating insects that can have damaging effects on your horse.

by Toots A. Banner

All horse-owners have to deal with pesky summer insects; it is simply a part of life around horses. Some of these summer pests aren't just a nuisance to you but can be dangerous to your horse's health as well. One of those pesky summer insects is the fly, and with flies come habronema, which is a genus of nematode. Habronemiasis (the infection caused by habronema) can infect the skin and other moist areas of the horse especially around the mouth, eyes, prepuce, or foreskin and is commonly called a summer sore.

Lifecycle

Habronema nematodes (stomach worms) inhabit the stomachs of horses and donkeys. The adult worms live in the horse's stomach wall. The female worms produce eggs inside the stomach, and the larvae hatch further down the gastrointestinal tract in the intestine. They then leave the intestines via the horse's feces, and stable flies, face flies and house flies pick up and ingest them. When the fly matures, the stomach worms also mature into their infective stage. While the fly feeds, it deposits the infective larvae around the horse's mouth, the horse swallows the larvae, and the life cycle is completed.

Flies deposit the infective larvae in skin wounds and moist areas of the horse. If the larvae migrate to other areas, they will not mature, but their migration can still cause local irritation. Some can travel through the nose and into the lungs where they may be trapped and form cysts.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Summer sores are easily confused with sarcoids or other skin cancers such as squamous cell carcinoma, a skin biopsy may be necessary to correctly diagnose habronemiasis. Summer sores can be treated with the oral administration of an ivermectin de-wormer as well as topical and/or oral steroids to reduce the inflammation and irritation, but they can persist over a long time if not treated promptly and effectively. Having the lesions surgically removed is an answer to eliminating sores that do not respond to traditional medical therapy. Your veterinarian may also recommend additional medications to assist in healing.

Prevention

Thorough examination of your horse daily can aid in detection of small

wounds that should be treated before fly infestation can occur. Horses of any age can get summer sores, although some are more susceptible especially if an immunodeficiency exists. A number of products are commercially available since the best way to prevent summer sores is fly control, and in this case: an ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of cure.

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