

VET PROFILE

**SARAH SMITH**



Sarah joined Rosssdales Hertfordshire in September 2018, having recently returned from working as an equine vet in Australia.

She qualified with Distinction from the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, Edinburgh in August 2016. Following graduation, she moved to Sydney, Australia to undertake a rotating internship at Randwick Equine Centre. She stayed on to become an Associate at the practice, where she gained experience in ambulatory work, overground endoscopy and anaesthesia.

Sarah enjoys all aspects of ambulatory work, with a particular interest in dentistry, diagnostic imaging and internal medicine.



Feed supplementary forage in the form of good quality hay or haylage when weather conditions mean that there is little or no grazing available.

# Equine health during the winter months

By Sarah Smith BVM&S MRCVS

The winter months can bring a number of health issues for horses and ponies in the UK, some of which are highlighted in this article.

## Winter Turnout

If your horse lives outdoors 24/7 or is being turned out daily, it's important that there is adequate shelter to protect him/her from the elements. If several horses are turned out together, field shelters should be large enough for all field companions. Ensure droppings are removed regularly from the shelter, as you would the rest of the field or a stable. Take time ahead of winter to check your shelter and carry out any required maintenance.

As the growth of the grass slows you may need to feed supplementary forage in the form of hay or haylage. If your horse is receiving a limited amount of hard feed, consider feeding a feed balancer to ensure he/she is receiving sufficient vitamins and minerals. Hay can be placed in multiple areas of the field to encourage your horse to move around and to reduce poaching the

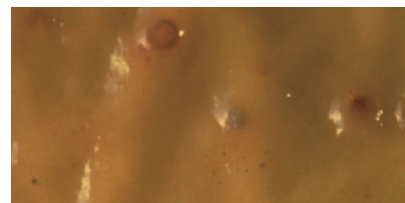


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ground in one area. Hay and haylage have a lower water content than grass and are less digestible so the horse requires more drinking water than when eating grass alone. There should be a constant supply of clean drinking water and when temperatures plummet, remember to break any ice at least twice a day. Offering lukewarm water may encourage some horses to drink in very cold weather.

## Parasite Control

We recommend performing regular faecal worm egg counts for each horse throughout the grazing season (4 times from spring to early winter), plus a blood or saliva test for tapeworm, as part of a strategic worming programme. This ensures that only horses with a worm burden are treated, thereby reducing the development of resistance to dewormers. An appropriate dewormer should be administered to your horse in early winter in



Encysted small redworms are the larval stages of the small redworm and one of the most common and harmful worms found in horses. Horses should be treated with an appropriate dewormer for these worms in early winter.

order to treat for encysted small redworms.

A critical part of worm control is the regular removal of all droppings from paddocks.

Please speak to your veterinary surgeon for more advice on strategic worming programmes, as requirements vary between horses and between different premises.

## Respiratory disease

Many horses spend long periods of time stabled during the winter months, which may predispose them to respiratory diseases. Clinical signs can include dullness, coughing, nasal discharge, a high temperature (fever) and an increased respiratory rate. Ideally, horses should be turned out as much as the weather conditions allow in order to avoid these issues. When this is not possible, the following advice can help to reduce the risk of respiratory disease:

- Ensure that your stable has good ventilation and is as free of dust as possible.
- Use bedding that is as dust-free as possible. For example, shredded cardboard, good quality shavings, etc, and avoid mucking out whilst your horse is in the stable. Grooming your horse outdoors can help reduced the dust levels in your stables and to which your horse's respiratory tract is exposed.
- Feed good quality hay or haylage that has minimal dust and fungal spores. Soaking or steaming hay will reduce the amount of respiratory 'allergens' (dust, fungal spores, bacteria, etc). However, do not soak for more than 4 hours, as this encourages growth of bacteria and fungal spores, which can then cause more problems than you started with. Soak hay in a cool place, out of direct sunlight, as this too will increase growth of unwanted bacteria and fungi.

## Impaction colic

Reduced activity, stress, a decrease in water consumption and a change in diet may all contribute to the development of impaction colic. This is an accumulation of dried feed in the gastrointestinal tract (usually the large intestine). Look out for dullness, dry and/or reduced production of droppings. These symptoms are usually accompanied by any of the classic signs of colic, such as lying down, straining, rolling, flank watching, pawing, and kicking at the belly. If you notice any of these signs, contact your vet immediately.

You can reduce the risk of impaction colic by the following:

- Carrying out changes to your horse's diet and turnout time slowly over 5-7 days, so that the microflora of the digestive system have time to adapt.
- Avoid dehydration by ensuring that your horse has a constant supply of clean drinking water. Using buckets rather than automatic drinkers allows water intake to be monitored easily. Provide a salt lick to encourage your horse to drink and consider soaking/steaming hay. Wet any feeds well to increase the fluid intake.
- Do not alter your feed just because of the colder weather – consider your horse's level of exercise, the reduction in grass/increase in hay, etc, and seek advice from a qualified nutritionist and/or your vet.
- Provide plenty of good quality forage. This

is how horses keep warm – by digesting the structural carbohydrates in hay and high fibre feeds. Haylage is approximately 20% higher in water content than hay but often contains more sugars, so only feed haylage if you wish your horse to have the additional energy it often provides (hay and haylage should be tested if you need to know the nutrition levels, which may help with horses that are carrying too much or too little condition. Visual assessment if not accurate).

- Provide your horse with some daily exercise, particularly if you are stabling him/her over the winter months. This stimulates gut movement, helps to prevent joints becoming stiff and provides mental stimulation – resulting in a happy and healthy horse!

## Too many rugs?

Consider the following points and be honest with yourself when deciding whether or not your horse needs a rug.

- Horses and humans are very different. Horses have a large caecum that keeps them warm by digesting forage – the human equivalent is the appendix, which



is unable to produce heat. Horses are also able to withstand lower temperatures than humans, without needing to use energy to keep warm. This means that if you feel cold, your horse may not necessarily feel cold.

- Clipped horses will usually need rugging, but owners will need to monitor the outside temperature, wind and rain conditions to determine the correct weight of rug required for the weather conditions.
- As horses are efficient at keeping warm, they struggle to cool down once they have overheated. This is exacerbated by excessive rugging (particularly when temperatures vary) and is incredibly stressful for the horse.
- Regularly body condition score your horse during the winter months. A number of equine charities and nutrition companies recommend different condition scoring systems – choose one that works for you, use it consistently, and be honest. If your horse is overweight use the winter months to help your horse reduce weight by either by not using a rug, or use a lighter weight rug than you would

usually. This will allow your horse to lose weight safely and gradually by burning extra calories. A horse that is overweight, especially when the winter ends and spring begins, is at higher risk of laminitis.

- Excessive rugging can cause sweating, which may predispose to bacterial and fungal infections of the skin (see below).
- If your horse is wearing a rug, ensure you remove it at least once daily to check for rubbing, sores and to reposition the rug after it may have slipped/shifted over the previous 24hrs.

## Mud fever

Pastern dermatitis, more commonly referred to as 'mud fever' (also known as 'greasy heel' and 'cracked heel'), is caused by the bacteria

*Dermatophilus congolensis*, which is found in the soil. Look out for scabs forming on the lower limbs (particularly white limbs) accompanied by discharge, cracked skin, and sometimes matted hair. These limbs are usually hot, painful and swollen, and horses with mud fever can be very lame.



A severe case of pastern dermatitis, commonly referred to as 'mud fever'.

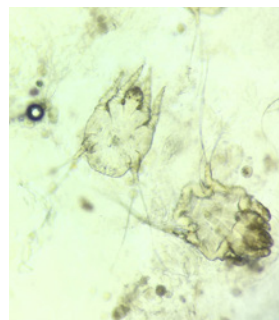
These clinical signs can be caused by other conditions such as *Chorioptes* mites ('leg mange'), fungal infection, liver disease, or leucocytoclastic vasculitis. It is therefore important that you seek veterinary advice to achieve the correct diagnosis and treatment plan.

Treatment of mud fever involves gentle, gradual removal of the scabs by washing the legs with a medicated shampoo, thorough drying, and then application of a topical treatment. Sometimes it may not be advised to wash the legs, and instead a cream-based 'sweat' can be performed over the course of several hours to a day. Your vet will advise

you which is the best course of treatment for your horse. Some horses may require anti-inflammatory and topical or systemic antibiotics, which your vet will be able to prescribe as required.

The following advice should help to reduce the likelihood of your horse developing mud fever:

- Fence off muddy areas of the field, rotate paddocks and provide plenty of clean, dry bedding in stables.
- Some horses benefit from daily washing/hosing off of mud, whilst for others it seems



*Chorioptes* mites, shown under a microscope, cause leg mange, which is commonly seen in horses

to make them worse. Washing can further weaken the skin, allowing bacterial and fungal infections to infect the skin more easily. Again, ask your vet which course of action is the best for your individual horse.

- Ensure that legs are always dried thoroughly. This is particularly important if you are using an oil-based barrier cream, because these creams can trap moisture against the skin and exacerbate problems if not used correctly.
- Regularly check your horse's legs for signs of mud fever (particularly if he/she has feathers) so that you can treat the condition early.

### Rain scald

This common skin condition is caused by the same bacteria as mud fever. Signs to look for include scabs, matted hair and clear discharge along your horse's back and hindquarters. Contact your vet if you are concerned – they will usually prescribe a medicated shampoo and a topical treatment.

Sweating can exacerbate rain scald, so ensure you are not excessively rugging



Rain scald is caused by the same bacteria as mud fever

your horse. Avoid sharing rugs, grooming equipment or tack because this can transfer the bacteria between horses. Ensure that equipment is regularly disinfected.

### Hoof problems

When horses are constantly exposed to wet conditions their feet become saturated and problems such as abscesses, thrush (bacterial and fungal infections), white line disease (damage to the hoof wall) and bruising of the sole can occur. Access to a dry standing area is hugely beneficial to horses living out. For stabled horses, ensure that bedding is kept clean and dry.

Pick out and clean feet daily, then use topical products to treat, and preferably prevent, thrush and deterioration of the hoof horn. Regular shoeing or trimming is essential to maintain foot balance, hoof structure and healthy horn. Any splits or cracks should be addressed before they deteriorate and become infected. Long term use of hoof supplements (for those horses that need it), containing biotin, are valuable in maintaining healthy, good quality hoof horn, which is more resistant to infection, crumbling and breaking.



Thrush in the horse's frog is caused by a bacterial infection

### Dealing with the dark, the snow and the ice

High visibility clothing is essential when riding and dealing with horses during the darker winter months. Take great care when riding in the snow: do not go faster than a trot (if safe to do so) and only ride on familiar territory. Coating your horse's shoes and soles with petroleum jelly may help to prevent snow balling up within the hooves.

Try to ensure that there is always good access to your horses: keep driveways, yards and walkways to paddocks clear of snow and ice by using a snow shovel, salt and grit, so that in an emergency your vet or farrier can reach your horse easily.

**Rosswales Hertfordshire provides ambulatory veterinary services throughout Hertfordshire and the surrounding counties. Contact us on 01462 790221 or visit [www.rossdales.com/hertfordshire](http://www.rossdales.com/hertfordshire).**

