An itchy horse that rubs his mane and tail or bites the underbelly may just have mites! Mange is an intensely itchy skin disease caused by tiny insects called mites. Most mites you cannot see with your naked eye, hence identification is usually delayed, and the horse will exhibit itchy symptoms for no apparent reason.

Mites live on the surface of the skin or in tunnels a few millimeters beneath the skin. Females deposit eggs in burrows or beneath scabs. Eggs hatch in about four days. Mites reach maturity soon thereafter and live only one to two weeks. The whole cycle takes only 15 to 20 days. For horses suffering from chronic mange, the life cycle of the mites just keeps repeating, infecting the horse on a continuous basis. Unless treatment is received, the horse will have no relief.

There are several species of mites that affect horses.

A number of possible causes must be considered when confronted with an itchy horse, including fungi, insect bites, irritating plants, mechanical abrasion, lice and mites.

Should I be concerned that my horse may have mites?

- **Psoroptic mites** - Look for mane and tail rubbing, crusty skin, occasional small red lumps, inflammation, thinning of hair in these areas. Horses may present with head shaking and a drooping ear.

- **Chorioptic mites** - Look for epidermal debris between the hairs at the skin surface below hocks and knees – symptoms include leg stomping, chewing and rubbing lower legs on anything in sight. Severe cases result in hard crusts that split and bleed.

- **Sarcoptes mites** – Small red lumps appear on the horse’s skin especially near the head, ears, neck, chest, flank and abdomen – secondary infection likely causing crusts, weeping serum, hair loss and thickening of skin.

**The Diagnosis**

Diagnosis should always be performed by a qualified veterinarian. In most cases, scrapings are taken from the edge of the lesion where there are thick crusty flakes. Skin scrapings should be placed in sealed containers and promptly taken or sent to a laboratory for a thorough examination. Another effective method of collecting mites from the skin surface and hair is by using a vacuum cleaner fitted with an in-line filter. The material collected along with the filter is then examined as a skin scraping would be.

- **Psoroptic mites** also called tail mites, produce lumps and patches of hair loss over in the mane and tail. Psoroptes are pearly white in colour. Horses may present with head shaking and a drooping ear.

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**Pruritus** (noun): a sensation that causes the desire or reflex to scratch

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Itchy horse?

check for **MITES**

by Tabitha Jones

Mane-Tail-Feather

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The Psoroptes mite prefers ears and areas of thick hair, but untreated infections will spread over the entire body surface of the animal. They live in colonies on the surface of the skin and spread very quickly. These oval-shaped non-burrowing bloodsuckers of 0.6mm long with 8 legs live on the surface of the skin, causing a pruritic otitis externa in horses. Bites of these lymph sucking mites cause inflammatory lesions that ooze fluid which dries to form crusts. The infection is known as psoroptic mange. The bare scabby areas produced are unsuitable for the mites, which migrate to surrounding healthy skin, potentially spreading tissue damage over the entire body.

Psoroptes mites can survive off the host for 2 to 3 weeks. On contact with the skin the mites start to burrow where they latch on to feed on the skin debris at the skin surface, without infected animals.

It is vital that the stables and paddocks are cleaned out and treated as soon as possible to try to get some relief. Since these mites can migrate to areas such as the neck, trunk and face. It is important to also treat in-contact horses and to decontaminate the environment.

For Psoroptes mites treatment success clipping is advised before applying an anti-parasitic agent. Ivermectin reduces mite numbers, but may not be 100% effective. Remember to treat the entire body as the mites can migrate to areas such as the neck, trunk and face. It is important to also treat in-contact horses and to decontaminate the environment.

Selenium sulphide based shampoo has recently been shown to be a safe and effective treatment for equine chorioptic mange (Curtis 1999). In an open-pilot trial selenium sulphide shampoo was used to treat seven horses, two of which were also subjected to clipping of the hair coat from the distal limbs. The horses were treated with whole body shampoo on three occasions at five day intervals and no live mites were found in skin scrapings from any of the horses at follow up examinations. No adverse effects were observed in the treated horses or in the stable staff applying the treatment. Selenium sulphide based shampoo is available through some pharmacies.

Some veterinarians treat sarcoptic and psoroptic mites with organophosphate insecticides applied to the horse's skin every 12 to 14 days. Topical treatments of organophosphate insecticides are generally effective against chorioptic mites. The skin should be completely saturated and washed and scabs should be dislodged with a stiff brush. Use of antibacterial medications can be used to treat secondary infections.

Natural Alternative Treatments

Yellow milling sulphur mixed with an oil based solution either homemade or commercially bought such as Shapley’s M-T-G works to suffocate the mite in the oil whilst the sulphur acts as a natural insecticide. Sulphur is non-toxic to mammals, but it may irritate eyes and skin. Sulphur may change the color of some jewelry. Apply to affected areas at least every 3 days for 21 days.

Lime sulphur is made by boiling lime and sulphur together. This mixture is used as a dormant spray for mites. Diluted solutions of lime sulphur can be used as a dip for pets to help control ringworm (fungus), mange and other dermatoses and parasites. Untreated body sulphur is corrosive to the skin and can cause serious injury.

Neem oil

Neem oil not only deals with the mites naturally it also soothes the skin, numbs the pain, relieves the itching, reduces the inflammation and redness and heals any secondary infection that might have occurred because of scratching and open lesions.

MTF: Supplier of safe treatments to kill Mites

Shapley’s M-T-G

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