Parasites in horses

Horses require ongoing parasite control management

EXTERNAL PARASITES

In Australia, the parasites that affect horses and donkeys are externally: ticks and lice, and internally: worms and bots.

Daily grooming of your horse is the best way to thoroughly inspect the horse for external parasites (as well as other injuries). Internal parasites will always be present in the horse and require ongoing management and a scheduled control program.

TICKS

In Australia, the main ticks that affect horses and donkeys are cattle ticks, bush ticks (New Zealand ticks) and scrub (paralysis) ticks.

Horses in tick areas must be checked regularly, and daily grooming is the best opportunity to inspect your horse closely. Unengorged ticks are small flat and brown. Adult engorged ticks turn grey or dark blue and become the size of a pea. When ticks drop off they leave behind a crater-like sore in the middle of an itchy/painful lump. Some horses scratch these excessively and the sores could become infected.

Cattle ticks are found in Queensland, N.E. NSW, the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Bush ticks (New Zealand cattle tick) occurs in Australia and New Zealand. In Australia it is found in the coastal region of south east Queensland, the NSW coastline and north eastern Victoria.

Paralysis (scrub) ticks are a problem in coastal areas of eastern Australia and are carried by native animals. More common in late winter, spring and summer, they can sometimes kill a young foal but adult horses have some resistance. In scrub tick areas, foals should be checked every day.

Tick removal and control

Any ticks can be manually removed by gripping them, preferably using tweezers, close to the mouthparts and pulling them off. It is not necessary to kill them off first, even if the mouthparts are left behind, but always keep an eye out for infection or excessive swelling in the days after.

When using a tickicide product, ensure it is one registered for use in horses, and always ask professional advice before using these on a young foal. It has been reported that some pour-on insecticides will prevent ticks from attaching. Always check the labels and seek professional advice.

If you live in a tick free area you must report the tick finding to your local agriculture department (DPI or similar).

LICE

Horses and donkeys that are stressed, unhealthy and in poor condition are most susceptible to lice, although other horses can also be affected. The lice can usually be found around the mane and tail area. A dog flea comb or human head lice comb will pick up the lice, and help you detect the infestation. Lice will also move to the end of the hairs where they can be easily seen when the horse gets sweaty.

Control is fairly easy with many products available at produce or saddlery stores. Lice are passed on by physical contact, so all the horses on the property, their rugs, brushes and saddle blankets will also need treatment.

Carefully read the labels and never use products that are formulated for other animals such as cattle or sheep.

WORMS

The major parasitic worms that affect horses are the large and small strongyles, tape-worms, roundworms and pinworms.

Stomach bots are not worms they are the larval form of a type of fly. Bots are not as harmful as worms however they still require regular control.

The common signs of worm infestation are tail rubbing, pale gums, ill thrift, colic and poor coat. Worms can also cause diarrhoea or sudden death in some extreme cases. If a horse is showing any of these signs then he/she already has a significant worm burden and you should seek veterinary advice before administering any worming paste.

The life cycle of parasitic worms

Parasitic worms rely on a specific host animal to complete their life cycle. The cycle of most equine worms involves eggs being passed out with the manure (faeces) which then hatch out as larvae, the larvae attach themselves to grass which in turn is eaten by a horse.

Once inside, the larvae migrate through the organs of the body (different worms have different behaviours) causing damage as they go.

DID YOU KNOW?

Ticks are not insects! They are members of the arachnid (spider) family and they actually have 8 legs!

Scorpions, spiders and mites are members of this same group. This is why ticks require control with a specialised tickicide product.
Eventually the larvae, after becoming adults, end up in the digestive system of the horse and deposit eggs which pass out with the dung repeating the cycle.

Types of worms:
- Small strongyles (cyathostomes, small redworms). Instead of migrating into other organs, small strongyles burrow in the wall of the large colon and while encysted they are resistant to most wormers.
- Large strongyles (bloodworms, redworms). The eggs hatch in the faeces, and larvae are ingested by the horse when he eats grass. In the gut they migrate through the intestine walls into the blood vessels, causing damage and blockages.
- Roundworms (ascarids). The adult worms live in the intestines where they lay eggs that pass out with the droppings to the pasture. The young worms live part of their life in and damage the horse’s lungs. They are particularly dangerous to foals and yearlings.
- Pinworms (Oxyuris equi). The females lay eggs around the anus and the egg masses are extremely itchy. Adult pinworms may be seen around the anal area. When the horse rubs his tail they drop to the ground, the horses eat them and the cycle repeats.

- Tapeworms in horses are similar to those in dogs and humans. They can lead to colic, rough hair coat, weight loss through nutrient deficiencies and diarrhoea.
- Bots (botfly larvae). The adult fly lays its eggs on the horse’s front legs and shoulders. When the horse rubs his lips against them the eggs hatch in the horse’s saliva and pass into the stomach where they can cause ulceration.

WORM CONTROL
The best way to control worms is to combine several methods including a worming program, faecal egg counts, paddock hygiene and pasture management.

Worming with an effective anthelmintic (worming) paste is an essential part of horse management. Ask your vet to develop a worm control program to suit your needs. This will include a “rotation” between worming pastes containing different active ingredients. Wormer rotation is necessary to prevent resistance in worms, which may result in a reduced efficacy of the drugs in the future.