

November 2023 Rain Scald and Mud Fever

What causes rain scald?

Rain scald is a skin condition that develops scabs usually on the back and flanks of a horse caused by a bacteria called dermatophilus congolensis. This organism normally lives on the skin not causing a problem, but causes an issue when the skin barrier is broken down. The skin breaks down due to being wet for long periods of time, for example if the horse is sweating in a rug for prolonged periods, or if the horse has a pre-existing condition such as Cushings resulting in weaker skin. White skinned areas may be more susceptible to infection. The scabs can be painful to the horse when removed but they are not usually itchy unless there is another component such as a secondary bacterial infection or parasites. The condition is contagious between horses either by direct contact or by sharing rugs, tack and brushes so it is important to not share equipment between horses.



How do I treat rain scald?

If your horse is diagnosed with rain scald they should be brought into a stable and kept dry. If this is not possible, a waterproof rug should be used. If your horse has developed rain scald whilst rugged, it is essential to remove the rug and let the horse's back dry. If there is pus underneath the scabs or the case is particularly severe, they may require antibiotics. The scabs may be difficult to remove so they can be coated in an aqueous cream (we stock a medicated cream in the practice) and left for 24 hours to soften before attempting removal. Some cases may require sedating to enable you to remove the scabs. Avoid barrier creams as these can stop the area drying correctly. Once the scabs are removed, clean the area gently with dilute Hibiscrub ideally for 7-10 days. It is important to wash any grooming brushes in disinfectant to reduce the risk of reinfection. Rain scald can take several weeks to heal, during this time it may be advisable not to work your horse as the saddle area may be uncomfortable.

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How do I prevent rain scald?

It is important to ensure your horse isn't getting too hot either by over rugging or if they have grown an excessive coat for the weather conditions. If the latter is the case it may be worth clipping your horse to keep it cooler and potentially testing your horse for Cushings. Excessive weight on your horse can also result in your horse not managing their body temperature and make them more likely to sweat. Some very overweight horses also end up with crevice type areas over their spine where they can pool water, it is essential for these to lose weight, not only to reduce the risk of rain scald but also to reduce the risk of other medical and orthopaedic conditions.

To prevent rain scald, it is also important to ensure there is a field shelter to enable your horse to get out of the worst of the conditions or if possible stable them for periods of time to enable them to dry out.

What causes mud fever?

Mud fever is very similar to rain scald caused by the horse's skin becoming softer due to wet weather and muddy fields leading to prolonged wetting of their hair, enabling the bacteria *dermatophilosis congolensis* to infect the skin. Secondary bacterial infections can also develop.

The skin barrier can also be broken down by other factors including trauma, UV damage from sunlight, mites, liver disease and sarcoids. So, if you are having a problem with mud fever it may be worth us checking your horse in case something else is the cause.

How do I prevent it?

Try to prevent your horse standing in mud for long periods of time. If possible, fence off the muddiest parts of the field. Try to rotate the paddocks your horse is in to prevent the fields becoming poached. Don't wash your horse's legs off every time they come in, instead brush the dry mud off their legs.

If your horse has been itching their legs before the wet weather has set in, it may also be worth having us out to identify the cause and potentially treating them for the cause, for example mites.



Can horses get rain scald and mud fever multiple times?

Horses don't develop an immunity to the bacteria so can develop both rain scald and mud fever again.

What do I do if I suspect my horse has mud fever?

It is important once a horse has mud fever to try and keep their legs dry and clean. It is necessary to clip around the affected lesions and remove the horse's feathers. This is so we can access the lesions to treat them. You need to soak the scabs to try to remove them and apply an antibacterial cream to the lesions. We have one in the practice that we make specifically to treat mud fever. It is very important that you remove these scabs to enable the condition to resolve. If your horse's lesions are very bad or your horse is particularly sensitive, it may be advisable to sedate your horse to ensure the area is cleaned well. If the skin becomes very inflamed your horse can develop a cellulitis so may require systemic antibiotics. If your horse's legs are swollen it is also advisable to keep them moving, each day either by being walked in hand or if possible, going on a walker. If your horse's legs become uncomfortable or lame, they will need some sort of pain relief.

Mud fever can take time to heal so it is important to be patient and allow your horse's legs to heal and not turn them out too soon.

Don't forget our client evening on the 6th December at the practice on breeding and youngstock health! Please ring for more information and to RSVP.