

Common Skin Disease

By Rick Wolfe DVM

I am writing this article to discuss some very common forms of skin disease in horses. The Veterinary Profession knows volumes about skin disease in horses and to fully discuss this topic we would need to consult several reference books

The most common skin disease that horses acquire has several names which includes: GIRTH ITCH, RINGWORM, SKIN CRUD, STABLE ITCH, SKIN FUNGUS, etc. All of these names refer to the same disease, which is a fungus infecting the skin. The medical name is DERMATOPHYTOSIS. Most cases of this ringworm in horses are caused by one of 5 or 6 specific species of ringworm. Some of these species of ringworm or fungi can be transmitted to people or to other animals, especially dogs.

Clinically, the lesions look like small crusty areas of the skin about the size of a dime or eventually larger with hair loss. It can spread just about anywhere on the horses' body. If it spreads or actually starts on the girth area, it can certainly cause a sore from the saddle and will take a long time to heal, even with treatment. If the condition is left untreated in this area a secondary bacterial infection may occur complicating the problem even more. All fungi including those causing ringworm thrive in a moist environment, therefore, the condition is most common in the wet months which in Louisiana is in the winter. The fungus is transmitted from horse to horse by CONTACT, which includes horses rubbing against each other, particularly in winter months when the weather is colder, ALSO by contact of combs, brushes, tack, etc. between horses. Obviously, a major part of the control and treatment is cleaning these items between horses, or even the same horse. For example: a horse has been brushed one week with his or her own brush, a few days later the horse is diagnosed with ringworm or girth itch, the horse is treated for a week or so and the condition is on the mend., then the horse is brushed with the same brush from before and guess what?., back comes the girth itch.

The treatment has to include control as described above or nothing will work. There are many drugs or chemicals that will kill the fungus including mild iodine preparations, athletes foot remedies for people, dilute solutions of captan (rose dust), etc. This is one area of veterinary practice where there are many right ways to handle the actual medical treatment, and I would defer specific questions to your own local veterinarian. One thing that is very important however is that we need to be very careful with the health of

the skin. If part of the treatment causes irritation or even blistering of the skin, the condition may get dramatically worse. Anything one can do that will improve the general health of the skin and hair coat will assist in the healing process and help prevent it from coming back. Therefore, in our practice we never use harsh chemicals such as straight iodine, and even tamed iodine solutions such as betadyne may not irritate the skin very much but it dries it out so much that the skin becomes unhealthy.

Most of these cases of ringworm respond well to treatment and the fungus is killed in a few days and the hair grows back in a couple of weeks.

Another disease that I need to mention is called RAIN ROT. This condition is very similar to ringworm but is not caused by a true fungus. Most of the cases of rain rot (*Dermatophilus congolensis*) are characterized by clumps of hair or mats of hair forming on the back in wet weather. These clumps are fairly hard and when they are pulled off the hair comes with it. This disease is also transmitted by contact and is treated the same as ringworm except that this disease can be treated at least in part with antibiotics (internal) such as penicillin.