

Pastern Dermatitis

Pastern Dermatitis is the medical name for a skin reaction commonly known as Scratches (also known as Greasy Heel or Mud Fever). These are not a specific conditions but terms used to describe problems seen on the lower limbs of some horses. The most common site for this reaction is the back of the pasterns and heels but it can sometimes be found higher on the lower limb. Horses with heavy feathering and horses that either work or live in moist environments are most prone to developing this disease. Scratches is more often associated with hind limbs and it has been suggested that white colored legs may be more at risk for the development of this condition.

Clinical Signs

In the early stages, pastern dermatitis appears as itchy, sensitive skin that is sometimes associated with swelling (top photo). As the condition becomes more chronic, the skin becomes thickened and oozing lesions or growths can be found (bottom photo). This condition can be very painful in some cases and may even cause lameness. In very chronic or severe cases, cellulitis may develop in limbs affected with scratches.



Causes

Chronically wet skin and hair from environmental moisture (such wet pastures or thick feathers that keep moisture in) can weaken the skin's defenses and allow various organisms to infect the skin. The causes for pastern dermatitis are many and most commonly include bacteria, fungi, and/or parasites. In other instance, some horses can have an immune condition that can lead to an infection causing pastern dermatitis.

Treatment

Aggressive, committed treatment is usually successful for this condition. Treatment includes: clipping the hair from the affected area, gently cleaning the skin with warm water and antibacterial scrubs (iodine, chlorhexadine, silver based cleansers), removing the buildup of exudate, drying the leg, applying appropriate topical medications (type may vary depending on your veterinarian's assessment). Other treatments such as antibiotics, leg wraps, anti-inflammatory medication may be necessary depending on the severity of the disease.

Environmental changes

In addition to the treatments listed above, your veterinarian will discuss alternative environmental measures depending on the case. At times, a change of stabling will be recommended to keep the horse out of moist and muddy pastures. In addition, further diagnostics and treatments (such as biopsies and systemic treatments) may be required in certain cases. Without these husbandry changes, even the most aggressive topical treatment will not be 100% effective.



"INTERESTING HOW SOME OF THEM RUN WELL ON A MUDDY TRACK..."

Scratches can be frustrating condition for owners and horses but with hard work success can often be achieved!

Sincerely,

Abby Reising, DVM