



UNDERSTANDING INTERNAL PARASITES in Horses



Equine Internal Parasites

Internal parasites such as worms are silent killers. They are able to cause extensive damage, often without you realising your animals are infected. At the very least worms may rob the horse of valuable nutrients, cause gastrointestinal irritation and loss of condition. At their worst they may lead to colic, intestinal rupture, and death.

In terms of management priorities, establishing an effective parasite control program is second only to supplying your horse with high quality feed and clean, plentiful water.

Identifying the Enemy

There are more than 150 internal parasites that afflict horses, including several major species.

Among the most common and troublesome are:

- Small strongyles (Cyathostomes)
- Large strongyles (Large bloodworms)
- Ascarids
- Tapeworms
- Pinworms
- Bots
- Threadworms
- Lung worms



Any or all of these parasites may be present in the horse at one time, but they may be at different stages of their life cycles. This will influence the deworming programme needed to combat them. Keep in mind that some worms may lay more than 20 000 eggs a day, causing a rapid increase in pasture contamination.

Parasite Damage

Different parasites may harm the horse in different ways. They may damage tissues and vital organs, including the intestines, the lungs, liver, and stomach as they migrate through the horse's system to complete their life cycles. They may cause ulcerations and obstructions within the horse's digestive tract, or cause intense irritation as they lay their eggs.

Signs of Parasitism

Contrary to popular belief, many horses that harbour internal parasites may appear to be externally healthy, while on the inside the worms are causing significant damage. In contrast, in some horses, especially weanlings and yearlings, parasites can take a visible toll.

Signs of worm infestation include:

- Dull hair coat
- Weight loss
- Colic
- Diarrhoea
- Tail rubbing
- Summer sores
- Coughing and nasal discharge



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Faecal Examination

Faecal examination for worm eggs and larvae is a useful tool in setting up and monitoring an effective parasite control programme. This procedure involves taking two to three fresh faecal balls to your veterinarian for laboratory analysis. If the faecal balls can not be delivered immediately they should be stored in a sealed plastic container in a fridge. Rarely are the worms themselves visible in the manure, but by counting the numbers and types of parasite eggs or larvae present in the faecal sample, your veterinarian may recommend the most suitable deworming product. Faecal eggs per gram (EPG) counts provide an indication of the degree of parasite infestation within an individual animal or within a group of horses prior to deworming. This can also be applied within two weeks after deworming to indicate whether the dewormer has worked. Note that a negative EPG does not mean that an individual horse has no worms, as immature larval stages which do not produce eggs, could still be present in significant numbers.

Pasture Management and Deworming

Controlling worms in your horse is a two-pronged attack aimed at preventing the worm completing its life cycle through both pasture management and deworming.

Pasture Management:

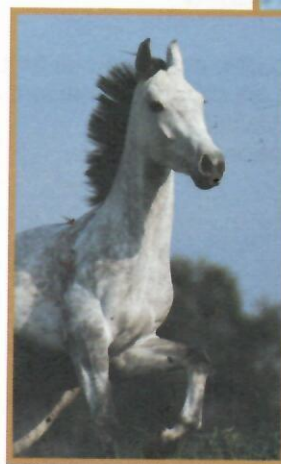
- Remove horse droppings from your pasture regularly, ideally twice a week.
- Divide paddocks into smaller areas so they can be alternately grazed and rested to reduce pressure on the pasture. This will also make it easier for you to remove droppings.
- Try not to overstock pastures. Ideally fields should contain no more than one or two horses per hectare.
- Interval resting of pastures may be applied, but is not always effective. Worm eggs and larvae can survive for long periods on pastures, so simply resting the pasture does not guarantee that it is worm-free.
- Graze pastures in rotation with cattle or sheep. Worms which affect horses are host-specific and cannot survive in cattle or sheep. Any larvae eaten by cattle or sheep will be destroyed. This is known as a biological vacuum-cleaning effect.
- Harrowing is not recommended as it may only act to spread the infective worm stages. It is generally only successful in hot countries where exposed parasites are killed by the heat and dry conditions.

Deworming:

- Consult your local veterinarian for an appropriate deworming programme for your horse's particular needs.
- Ideally select a deworming programme effective against both adult small strongyles as well as their encysted larval stages.
- Aim to use a longer dosing interval as this will help to reduce the likelihood of resistance developing.
- Deworm all new arrivals, using a dewormer known to control benzimidazole-resistant worms and larvae. Keep new arrivals in a stable or isolation paddock for 48 hours after deworming to limit pasture contamination by eggs that are passed.
- Weigh your horse to ensure accurate dosing, using a weigh-tape or scale.
- Deworm pregnant mares before and after foaling down.
- Utilise faecal egg counts to identify horses requiring deworming.
- Always keep a record of when you dewormed and which product you used.



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