

Mud Fever

Mud fever covers a wide range of skin reactions and is caused by dermatophilus congolensis. This is an infectious agent that loves wet, muddy ground, hence the name Mud Fever.

It causes inflamed scabby areas on the heels and pastern. The condition is more common on the hind legs and, although it affects all horses and ponies, it is more prevalent in the feathered breeds.

What does it look like?

- Skin becomes red and sore
- Progression to wet weeping areas with scabs forming and matting of the hair
- Superficial infection with pus forming under scabs will often develop
- Thickening of the skin over time which, when chronic, may split and produce painful cracks
- May develop general leg swelling following deeper infection, or even lymphangitis



How does it happen?

Skin irritation, and breakdown of the skin's natural integrity due to:

- Constantly wet/ damp conditions
- Unsanitary deep bedding
- Excessive washing of affected areas with inadequate drying
- Use of irritant chemicals or antiseptics
- Allowing feathers to be constantly damp
- Irritant school surfaces
- White skin tends to be more frequently affected
- Some more complicated cases may be due to an auto-immune condition

Once the natural immunity of the skin is broken down superficial bacteria, fungi and yeasts colonise the damaged areas of skin. A superficial infection can cause a progression to erosions and ulcers with serum oozing from the skin surface, which then causes further damage to the skin.



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What is the treatment?

If you catch it early enough, removing the cause and using simple skin soothing ointments might help to resolve the problem. However, if the area is oozing serum, if swelling or lameness is present, if your horse will not allow the areas to be touched or if the problem becomes persistent give your vet a call for advice.

The area should be kept dry. This could mean stabling your horse. It may be necessary to clip and remove feathers or overlying hair mats to get access to the damaged skin. If a superficial infection is present it may require:

- Sparing use of antiseptic washes (with thorough drying afterwards)
- Ointments containing antiseptic or corticosteroid
- Delicate removal of loose scabs may be recommended
- Occasionally, antibiotics or anti-inflammatories may be prescribed by your vet

Early diagnosis and treatment is really important. If it is allowed to become chronic, mud fever can be really difficult to resolve, especially once skin thickening and scarring has occurred.



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How can Mud Rash be prevented?

- Do not allow the lower legs to be constantly wet
- Brush off light mud as soon as it is dry
- Wash off heavier mud, but make sure you dry the area thoroughly afterwards and watch out for clay based soils
- Check your horse's legs regularly, especially the pasterns and heels
- Remove feathers if contributing to the skin irritation, but they may also protect the skin
- When using ointments, make sure you treat the skin surface, don't allow them to stick bedding and mud into hair matted with scabs
- Sparing use of lanolin or oils rubbed into the skin can improve natural waterproofing

Catching mud fever early is important to stop further complications. Give us a call if you are worried about your horse and mud fever.