

Advice for Treating Horse Skin Problems

By Don Blazer

Go to the barn, look at your horse, and you are going to see a lump, a bump, a scratch, or a sore. You are going to see these things on his face, neck, shoulder, girth, back, legs, or behind the pastern. Most lumps, bumps and scrapes are minor. But if you see Ringworm, Rain Rot, Scratches or Hives, then your horse has a problem and you have a duty, get busy and get rid of it.

Ringworm, frequently called girth itch, is a fungus that feeds on dead skin and hair, but doesn't invade living tissue, although you'll see scaly or crusty patches of skin that look somewhat like a scrape. Ringworm will cluster in dime to quarter-sized spots, which will be quite irritating to your horse who in turn may be trying to scratch the area making everything worse. You can, of course, follow conventional wisdom and bathe your horse with an iodine-based shampoo made specifically for equine fungus problems. Or you can use Lotrimin (anti-fungal cream for humans); which is my first choice. Apply the salve directly on the lesions. The way we used to do it was mix a thin paste of "rose dust" and water and apply that to the lesion. Rose dust contains

"captan," a fungicide used to dust plants, of course. It works quite well. Ringworm is highly contagious, so disinfect blankets, towels, brushes, girths, saddle pads and anything else that might come in contact with another horse. You can get ringworm too, so be sure to wash with an iodine-based soap before touching your nose or handling another horse.

Scratches is seen quite often when rain and winter weather arrive. Also known as greasy heel or mud fever, scratches can be very painful for your horse, even causing lameness. Scratches is an infection, with swelling, inflammation and open sores on the back of the pastern. While it can be caused by a number of things, the most common cause is chronically muddy, wet and unsanitary conditions; the kind of conditions you see in small pens. The most effective treatment I've seen is the use of SMZ (sulphur) tablets made into a paste and applied to the cleaned and dried infected area. You can get the tablets from your veterinarian and apply the paste yourself. Be careful, sometimes scratches are so painful, your otherwise tolerant horse may become a kicker. Wash the scratches with an antiseptic soap or an antibacterial shampoo, leave the soap or shampoo on for five to 10 minutes, then rinse and dry. Clean and dry are the key elements to stop scratches that can take up to two weeks to heal.

Rain Rot is caused by a bacteria which attacks moist skin. Biting insects can spread it. Rain Rot can get so bad that big hunks of hair will come out leaving ulcerated sores. While rain rot does not usually cause a lot of itching, it can cause the horse to be depressed and lose his appetite. Rain Rot is usually seen across the back and rump, where the horse gets the most rain. To make treatment more effective, it is a good idea to clip the hair around the sores. Again, be careful, clipping can cause pain. Wash the contaminated area with an iodine based scrub or an antiseptic shampoo. You may have to treat the condition several times a day for a week or more.

Hives are an allergic reaction that can be caused by dusts, molds, biting insects, weeds or even a change in feed. You'll feel terrible about what you think your horse is suffering, but he probably isn't too uncomfortable. Give him a bath with cool water, and while you are washing him think about what you have changed in his environment. It could be new bedding (shavings or straw), a new fly repellent, new feed or new "treats." In any case, if the hives don't disappear within 24 hours, consult your vet. Hives can cause depression, severe itching, loss of appetite. Generally your vet will treat the condition with steroids or antihistamines.

Ringworm, Rain Rot, Scratches and Hives may not be more than skin deep, but they are still no fun for your horse. And they can definitely put a damper on your riding schedule.