
HEAD AND HEAD

WINTER EQUINE NEWSLETTER

Winter 2017 Edition

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Merry Christmas, Happy New Year and welcome to the winter edition of the Head and Head Equine Newsletter. This month's article is about Recurrent Airway obstruction, a common cause of coughing at this time of year.

After a very mild autumn the colder weather is certainly starting to set in, and I am sure that every horse owner is looking ahead eagerly to the longer days, lighter rugs and dryer paddocks of spring. Until then, here a few common seasonal conditions to be aware of:

Mud fever - ('Pastern dermatitis' or 'Greasy heel'), is a skin condition which occurs initially due to a compromise in the skin's natural protective barrier, often after repeated or prolonged soaking of the legs. This allows the bacteria *Dermatophilus congolensis* to set up an infection. This bacteria thrives in muddy conditions, with some soil types seeming worse than others. Likewise, horses with feathered legs (which are harder to dry), or have white socks tend to be frequently effected. The first signs of mud fever include areas of hair loss, an increase in pinkness to the skin, and moist scabby lesions.

Keeping skin clean and dry is the best treatment, this may mean avoiding turnout for a while! Alternatively, turnout boots can be tried, but take care as an ill-fitting boot will rub, braking the skin and allowing bacteria in. The area should be cleaned with a mild antiseptic solution (diluted hibi-scrub), this should be left to soak in for 5-10 minutes to aid in removing all scabs which harbour bacteria. The key however, is to thoroughly dry the leg afterwards and if your horse will allow it; hairdrying is quite effective! Once and only once the leg is clean and dry, topical creams and ointments to soothe can then be applied, the best choice are those that contain antibacterial properties. Please get in touch if your horse becomes excessively painful, lame or swollen, as in rare cases medical treatment may be needed.

Lice - Long winter coats can be host to unwanted creepy crawlies at this time of year. If your horse is seeming itchy it may be that they have lice. These small ectoparasites can just about be seen with the naked eye clinging to the ends of hair, most commonly along the neck and under the mane. There are two types of lice that effect horses - those that bite (*Damalinia equi*), and those that suck (*Haematopinus asini*). The choice of effective treatment, either powder or injections, depends on the type of louse present - so it is worth a vet check, to ensure your treatment will work. Store horses' rugs separately and avoid sharing grooming brushes to prevent passing the unwanted guests to the horse in the stable next door!

Vets at Head and Head have been asked to speak at an evening equine event at Cornwall Farmers.

The previsual date for this information-packed evening is the Wednesday 1st February, please make enquiries to Nicky at Cornwall Farmers if you are interested in attending. Rumour is that there will also be a talk from a nutritionalist on everything you need to know to see your horse through the winter in the best of condition.



Winter Cough? RAO and what to do!

Winter time invariably means that most horses are stabled for longer and are fed more hay, because of this we inevitably see an increase in the number of Recurrent Airway Obstruction (RAO), cases at this time of year. RAO is also referred to as “Heaves” and used to be known as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD).

RAO is in many ways similar to human asthma, in horses there is an inflammatory response to inhaled allergens from the environment, eventually this results in constriction and narrowing of the airways, making it harder to breath. The most common trigger of RAO during the winter are dust and fungal spores found within hay and straw bedding.

Symptoms of RAO range from just the occasional cough (often heard in the mornings after stabling or during exercise), to severe wheezing and respiratory distress even when resting. In most cases RAO is suspected after simply examining the horse but occasionally and tracheal wash procedure using an endoscope is performed to obtain diagnostic samples.



Treatment:

Management of environmental factors is the most important for all horses with RAO, and may be all that is necessary for mild cases and ongoing prevention.

- * The ideal management for a horse with RAO is 24 hour turnout without contact with hay or straw, even in a field shelter! However if this is unfortunately not practical for your horse please consider as many of the following points as possible;
- * Soak all hay for 30mins to 1 hour before feeding to remove dust - You will be amazed at the colour of the water afterwards! Hay steamers are now commercially available which do a brilliant job. Haylage is a fair alternative but be aware that it is more calorific than hay!
- * Feed hay from the ground. This helps your horse not to breath in the dust and spores, as well as aiding natural drainage of mucus from the lungs.
- * Use rubber matting in stables to reduce the amount of bedding needed. The best beddings are dust extracted wood shavings or paper, as opposed to straw which harbours a lot of dust. Consider also the bedding of horses in neighbouring stables, especially if they share a common airspace, as this will still effect the number of allergen particles in the air.
- * Outside stables with good ventilation are preferable to indoor American barn styles. Cobwebs are a good indication of poor ventilation!
- * Some horses of RAO may require medical treatment comprising of in feed ventipulmin to dilate the airways, and in some cases also steroid anti-inflammatory. With a bit of training of these medications can be given by inhaler in order to reduce potential longterm side effects.