

Mud Fever

What is Mud Fever and what causes it?

Mud fever is a bacterial skin infection of the lower limbs of the horse. It is sometimes referred to as “greasy heels” or “cracked heels”. It is caused primarily by a bacterium called **dermatophilus congolensis** which thrives in muddy, wet conditions.

The bacterium can lie dormant in the skin for long periods but if the skin is compromised in some way it can cause an active infection which spreads causing inflammation of the skin. Prolonged wetting of the skin is the most common cause of activation, hence why we see the problem more in the winter months. Secondary infection with other bacteria can also occur.

The classical clinical signs include matting of the hair, serum oozing from the skin and the formation of crusty scabs. Underneath the scabs are ulcerated, raw looking areas, usually exuding pus. The affected areas may be painful to touch. In severe cases the entire limb may swell up and sometimes the horse will be lame both of which indicate the need for veterinary intervention.



The typical crusty scabs seen in cases of mud fever

How should it be treated?

There are many different creams, lotions and potions marketed for the treatment for mudfever but the most important part of treating the condition is keeping the skin clean and dry. This may mean keeping the horse stabled for a while to avoid wet and muddy conditions.

It is important to clip or trim hair away from the affected areas as hair traps moisture and dirt next to the skin. It is necessary to remove the scabs in order to get to the problem bacteria that lie underneath them. It may take several days of soaking and creams to soften

the scabs so that they can be removed and in some painful cases the horse may need sedating to remove scabs. The area should be washed with warm water and a mild antibacterial wash, such as chlorhexidine (eg Hibiscrub) or a medicated shampoo such as malaseb. Always use warm water as cold water will irritate the skin more. The area should then be rinsed well and then dried thoroughly. The scabs and other material washed off the leg can be infectious so should be disposed of carefully.

There are many creams that may help but these must always be applied to clean, dry skin. Smearing ointments and barrier creams on wet dirty skin or where the hair has not be trimmed away can make the problem worse. In mild cases Zinc, castor oil and lead acetate creams may help but only ever apply to clean, dry skin. We recommend and stock a mud fever ointment for mild cases and can prescribe antibiotic creams for more serious cases.

Severe cases will need veterinary attention and may require oral antibiotics and anti-inflammatories. The process will need to be repeated at least once daily for several days and sometimes weeks in order to clear up the problem. Although most cases will heal up completely with the correct management the skin is often left weakened and therefore prone to re-infection. It may be necessary to change the way the horse is managed in order to stop the problem recurring.



Prevention of Mud Fever

- Allow the horse to stand somewhere where the legs can dry off for a part of each day. Ideally a stable but could be achieved with an area of hardstanding, ménage, area of bark chips etc.
- Ideally allow the mud to dry then carefully brush off. If necessary wash of the wet mud, ideally with warm water then thoroughly dry off afterwards. Avoid over washing of the legs, especially with cold water.
- In some cases it may help to clip away excess feathering if it tends to get waterlogged and trap dirt and moisture next to the skin.
- Barrier creams (eg oily based herbal creams, MSM, goose grease etc) can be useful if applied to clean, dry skin but do not allow them to build up in the hair and trap dirt and moisture.
- Waterproof wraps/chaps/boots for turnout can be useful but again must be applied to clean dry skin and not left on for extended periods
- Avoid muddy, poached fields and wet conditions as much as possible
- Check the legs daily to detect problems early and initiate prompt treatment
- Keep bedding clean and dry
- Never bandage or put boots on wet or muddy legs, always ensure they are clean and dry first
- Regularly disinfect equipment and stable surfaces that may harbour bacteria