

Horse Health:

Mud Fever

What is it?

Mud fever, also known as **pastern dermatitis**, is a painful inflammatory skin condition that affects the lower limbs of horses. It's part of a group of skin disorders that cause redness, swelling, scabbing, and crusting, typically around the pasterns but sometimes extending higher up the legs.

It's most commonly seen in white limbs and heavily feathered breeds, but any horse can be affected. The condition can cause significant discomfort and, in severe cases, lead to lameness.

Mud fever is a common and often frustrating condition that affects horses, especially during wet and muddy seasons. While it can range from mild irritation to severe lameness, with the right knowledge and care, it can be managed and even prevented.

What causes it?

Mud fever is usually caused by bacterial infection, most commonly *Dermatophilus congolensis*, which enters the skin through abrasions or chronic wetting.

However, other causes include:

- Fungal infections
- Mites (e.g., *Chorioptes* or harvest mites)
- Photosensitisation
- Autoimmune diseases like equine leukocytoclastic vasculitis

Wet, muddy conditions soften the skin and make it more vulnerable to damage and infection. Once the skin barrier is compromised, bacteria can invade and cause inflammation and scabbing.

What horses are at risk?

Certain horses are more prone to mud fever:

- **Cobs and heavy breeds** with long feathers
- Horses with **white or unpigmented skin** on their legs
- Horses turned out in **wet, muddy fields**
- Horses with **sensitive skin** or a history of skin conditions
- Horses with **underlying immune or liver disorders**

Even healthy horses can develop mud fever if exposed to prolonged wet conditions without the chance to dry off fully.

What are the symptoms?

Mud fever can develop quickly and vary in severity. Common signs include:

- **Swelling and redness** of the lower limbs
- **Pain and heat** in the affected area
- **Scabs and crusts**, often with clumps of hair attached
- **Yellow oozing or discharge**
- **Lameness**, which can range from mild to severe

In advanced cases, the horse may become reluctant to move or show signs of discomfort when the legs are touched or handled.

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis is usually based on clinical signs and history. Your vet may:

- Examine the legs for swelling, scabs, and discharge
- Take swabs or skin scrapes to identify bacteria or fungi
- Perform a biopsy if an autoimmune condition is suspected

In most cases, diagnosis is straightforward, but persistent or unusual cases may require further testing to rule out underlying conditions.

How can it be treated or managed?

Environmental Management

The first and most important step is to keep the affected legs clean and dry. This may involve:

- Stabling or hard standing to avoid mud
- Clipping feathers to allow the skin to dry. Clipping can be painful if the skin is inflamed, so sedation and pain relief may be needed.
- Daily inspection of the legs, especially in winter

Scab Removal

Removing scabs can sometimes reduce bacterial load and allows healing; however, it should never be done by force:

- Apply a thick barrier cream (e.g., zinc-based or fatty acid-based)
- Cover with cling film and stable bandage overnight
- Gently wipe away loosened scabs with a clean cloth
- Dispose of used materials and disinfect the area to prevent reinfection.

Washing and Topical Treatments

- Use dilute shampoo (e.g., chlorhexidine or colloidal oatmeal) to clean the legs

- Rinse thoroughly and dry completely
- Apply antimicrobial or soothing creams as advised by your vet. Avoid harsh chemicals or over-washing, which can damage the skin further.

Pain Relief and Medication

- Anti-inflammatories to reduce inflammation and above all pain may be prescribed
- Systemic (in food or by injection) antibiotics may be needed in severe or persistent cases
- Topical steroids may help once infection is under control

Always follow your vet's guidance on medication and treatment duration.

Can it be prevented?

Yes: prevention is usually possible with good management:

Turnout and Environment

- Avoid turning out in poached or muddy fields
- Provide dry standing areas or rotate turnout to reduce mud exposure
- Use drying boots if appropriate, but ensure proper fit and cleanliness

Daily Checks

- Inspect legs at least once a day
- Dry legs thoroughly after washing or turnout
- Use clean towels or even a hair dryer if tolerated

Clipping and Barrier Creams

- Clipping feathers may help in very wet or muddy conditions
- Barrier creams can protect skin but must be used carefully. Apply only to clean, dry skin, and remove regularly to avoid trapping

moisture

General Health

- Address any underlying conditions (e.g., mites, immune disorders)
- Maintain good nutrition and hoof care

Mud fever may seem like a minor issue, but it can quickly escalate if not managed properly. The key is **early detection**, **consistent care**, and **environmental control**. If your horse shows signs of mud fever, don't wait - consult your vet and start treatment promptly.

With the right approach, most horses recover well and can return to normal activity. Prevention is always better than cure, so stay vigilant during wet seasons and keep those legs clean and dry.