

Horse Care:

Worm Control

Why Worm Control Matters

Internal parasites (worms) are a fact of life for horses, but heavy infestations can cause serious health problems. Modern worm control focuses on **targeted treatment** rather than routine dosing, to protect your horse's health and slow the development of drug resistance.

Worms live in the horse's gut and, in small numbers, usually cause no harm. However, heavy burdens can lead to:

- Weight loss and poor condition
- Colic (including severe, surgical cases)
- Diarrhoea
- Ill thrift and poor performance

The main culprits include **small redworms** (cyathostomins), **large redworms** (stronglyes), **roundworms** (ascarids), **tapeworms**, and **bots**. Historically, horses were wormed every 6–8 weeks, but this approach has led to **anthelmintic resistance** - worms that survive treatment and pass on resistant genes. Once resistance develops, it cannot be reversed, so we must use wormers responsibly.

How Do Horses Get Worms?

Most worms spread via **pasture contamination**. Eggs are passed in droppings, hatch into larvae, and are eaten by grazing horses. Some species, like tapeworm, need an intermediate host (forage mites), while bots rely on flies laying eggs on the horse's coat. Good pasture hygiene

and strategic testing are key to breaking this cycle.

The Role of Faecal Worm Egg Counts (FWECS)

A **faecal worm egg count** measures the number of strongyle eggs per gram (EPG) of manure. It helps identify horses shedding the most eggs and contaminating pasture.

Typical interpretations would include:

- **<200 EPG** – Low burden: no treatment needed.
- **200–1150 EPG** – Moderate: consider treatment.
- **>1200 EPG** – High: treatment required.

FWECS should be done **every 8–12 weeks during grazing season**.

They are not perfect - encysted small redworms and tapeworms don't show up - but they are an essential tool for reducing unnecessary worming.

How to collect a sample:

Take fresh droppings, avoid contamination with soil or bedding, and send to a lab promptly. Your vet or SQP (Suitably Qualified Person) can advise on timing and interpretation.

Tapeworm: Why Testing Matters

Tapeworms are common - studies suggest **over half of UK horses may be infected**. Heavy burdens increase the risk of colic, particularly caecocolic intussusception, a serious condition requiring surgery. Unlike strongyles, tapeworm eggs are shed intermittently, so FWECS are unreliable for detection.

Testing options:

- **Saliva test:** Simple, can be done by the owner.

- **Blood test:** Requires a vet.

Both measure antibodies, so results may remain positive for months after treatment. Based on results, your vet can advise whether treatment is needed. If testing isn't possible, many owners treat for tapeworm **once or twice a year**, typically in spring and autumn. However, if testing, most owners need only test once a year – usually in the autumn.

Seasonal Worming: Why Timing Counts

Parasite lifecycles are linked to the seasons, so your worming plan should be too:

- **Spring:** Start FWECs as grazing begins. Test for **tapeworm** if not done in autumn.
- **Summer:** Continue FWECs every 8–12 weeks. Treat only if counts are high.
- **Autumn:** Test for tapeworm (or treat if this is not possible). Consider treating for bots after the first frost.
- **Winter:** Treat for encysted small redworm with a product licensed for this stage, especially if FWECs have suggested a cyathostome burden.

Pasture Management: Your First Line of Defence

Reducing pasture contamination is as important as worming:

- Poo-pick daily or at least twice weekly.
- Avoid overstocking: More horses per acre = higher worm risk.
- Rotate grazing: Rest fields when possible.
- Cross-graze with sheep or cattle: Breaks the worm lifecycle.
- Don't spread untreated manure on grazing land.

Good management reduces the need for chemical treatments and slows

resistance.

Responsible Use of Wormers

When treatment is needed, follow these principles:

- **Weigh accurately:** Underdosing encourages resistance.
- **Use the right product:** Different drugs target different worms.
- **Don't worm and move immediately:** Leave horses on the same pasture for a few days so resistant worms don't dominate a "clean" field.
- **Rotate drug classes only when necessary:** Rotation for its own sake is outdated; base decisions on test results and veterinary advice.

Wormers are becoming progressively less and less effective as worms adapt to them, becoming resistant. So responsible use means that we are better able to keep using them when we really need to.