



Fast Fact Sheet: Feather Mites

What is it?

Feather mites, also known as “chorioptic mange” or simply “itchy heels”, are extremely common among horses, particularly feathered breeds. The lower legs are usually affected, but mites can spread anywhere on the horse’s body, causing severe itchiness.

Cause:

Heel mites (*Chorioptes spp.*) live on the skin’s surface, feeding on dead skin cells. Leg feathers provide an ideal environment as dead skin cells collect among the hairs, and the feathers protect mites from extreme temperatures.

Clinical Signs & Diagnosis:

Mite infestation is very itchy, causing horses to chew/bite their legs, stamp their feet, and/or scratch on objects. Signs of feather mites often worsen at night, when mites are more active. Mites cannot be seen by the naked eye, but a working diagnosis is often made based on risk factors (feathered legs) and clinical signs (itchiness). Diagnosis can be confirmed via skin scrape samples and/or fine combing legs and examining debris microscopically, avoiding potential mistreatment. Severe infestations can cause scabs or bleeding sore spots, and the horse may experience hair loss due to rubbing.

Should I call the vet?

Many owners treat for mites on the basis of clinical signs, without calling a vet, and this approach may lead to an improvement in signs. However, if signs persist after initial treatment, a vet should be consulted – prescription-only drugs may be required or, alternatively, feather mites may not be the problem and a veterinary consultation will be necessary to arrive at the correct diagnosis.

Treatment:

Treatment is challenging because mites are often widespread on the horse and in the environment. If one horse displays signs of infestation, all horses in the herd should be treated to avoid reinfestation. It is recommended to clip feathered legs to remove mites’ preferred environment, to detach mites already living in the feathers, and to allow topical treatments to reach the skin.

Legs should be washed with anti-parasitic shampoo (e.g., lime sulphur shampoos, selenium sulphide shampoos). Eggs are not affected by these shampoos so this treatment should be repeated after 7-10 days to target newly hatched eggs.

Dewormer medications (e.g., topical ivermectin, topical fipronil, injectable doramectin) may be helpful. It should be noted that a veterinary prescription is required for both these medications, and that doramectin (although widely used by vets) is not licensed for use in horses in the UK. It is worth taking advice before using ‘traditional’ treatments – some are effective but others, such as engine oil, are ineffective and harmful to the horse.



Example of sores from horses itching their legs. Clipping feathers off can aid treatment.

To eliminate mites from the environment, bedding must be removed, and stables, grooming tools, and tack disinfected as mites can live off-host for up to 70 days. Repeated treatments of horses and their environments, using several products, is often necessary.

Risk Factors & Prevention:

Mites most commonly infest horses with feathered legs (e.g., cobs, Clydesdales, Shires), but all horses are at risk. Infestations and their signs are usually worse over winter when horses are stabled. Hygiene is key to prevention. Keep feathers clean and dry. Avoid deep littering stables as mites thrive in warm, humid conditions. Watch for signs of mites/itchiness and begin treatment early.



Deep straw beds may not be suitable for horses with feather mites.

Recommended Resources:

World Horse Welfare webinar "[Recognising, managing, and preventing skin conditions in horses](#)"
University of Liverpool "[Chorioptic mange – Feather mites](#)" [pdf download]