**Fast Fact Sheet: Mud Fever**

**What is it?**
Mud fever, properly called “pastern dermatitis” is a very common problem in horses. Rather than being a specific disease, mud fever describes nearly 40 different skin conditions caused by bacteria, fungi, and/or mites. Pastern dermatitis can also be caused by other underlying diseases e.g. immune disorders, liver disease. Mud fever is usually (though not always) seen in horses living in wet or muddy conditions.

**Cause:**
Mud fever is often caused by *Dermatophilus* bacteria. These can live on the skin’s surface or in the environment without affecting the horse. However, if the horse’s skin is softened by constant wetness and/or damaged by abrasive mud, small cuts, or wounds, the bacteria can then take hold and cause infection. Abrasions caused by mite infestation can also leave skin vulnerable to mud fever. Frequent washing of legs increases risk of developing mud fever, particularly if cold water is used and/or legs are not dried afterwards.

**Clinical Signs & Diagnosis:**
Mud fever causes small scabs with attached tufts of matted hair. These scabs may be crusty, oozy, or otherwise leak discharge. The hind legs, specifically the back of the pasterns, are most commonly affected, though mud fever can occur in or spread to, other parts of the leg. The same condition can also occur elsewhere on the horse’s body, including the back and/or hindquarters, in which case it is referred to as rain scald. As mud fever gets worse it can cause heat and swelling. The skin can become raw and split and it can sometimes lead to cellulitis. This is painful, so the horse may react to pressure or flexion and may become lame.

Vets can take scab samples or skin scrapes to assist with diagnosis but may begin treatment based on signs and risk factors.

**Should I call the vet?**
If mud fever is caught early, it may be possible to treat it successfully without veterinary intervention, but if signs persist or if infection is suspected then a vet is needed to diagnose and advise on treatment. As mud fever can be very sore, a vet may also need to sedate the horse for treatment.

**Treatment:**
- Wash legs with warm water and a very dilute Hibiscrub (chlorhexidine) solution. **Do not** apply undiluted Hibiscrub directly to skin – 0.1% is recommended and don’t use more frequently than every 3 days. Rinse with warm water.
- Dry legs thoroughly with clean towels or kitchen roll. A hair dryer works well if the horse will accept it. The legs **must** be dried thoroughly.
• Cover any scabs with a barrier cream (e.g., Sudocream). If the horse is stabled overnight, the legs can be loosely wrapped with cling film and covered with a stable bandage or wrap. This will keep the legs clean and the cream on the legs. In the morning, wipe off the cream and remove the softened scabs. Reapply barrier cream prior to turnout. Do not apply wraps if the horse lives out.
• Only apply barrier cream to clean, dry legs. Cream over dirt or mud will trap in bacteria.
• While feathers can offer some protection against wet, muddy conditions, if the horse has mud fever the feathers may need to be clipped to allow treatments to reach the skin’s surface.

Risk Factors & Prevention:
Mud fever can affect any horse, though those with pink skin under white hair may be most vulnerable. The bacteria causing most cases of mud fever can easily spread from horse to horse through the environment or shared grooming tools/tack. Horses with lowered immune system function due to systemic conditions such as Cushing’s disease (PPID) are especially at risk.

Prevention is better than treatment, and good hygiene is the key to preventing mud fever. Check legs daily and keep them as clean and dry as possible. Other recommendations to prevent mud fever include:
• Do not over wash legs- daily is too often! It is better to let mud dry and brush it off than to wash legs every day. Frequent washing removes natural waterproofing and can soften and chap skin, allowing bacteria to take hold.
• If you do wash legs, use warm water, as cold water closes pores which can trap bacteria. Use antiseptic washes rather than products such as washing up liquid.
• After washing, thoroughly dry legs with clean towels, kitchen roll, or a hair dryer.
• Keep stable bedding clean and dry – avoid deep littering.
• Minimise mud in turnout areas:
  - Ensure horses have access to field shelters or other areas with dry footing
  - Practice pasture rotation and avoid overstocking fields
  - Use mud mats or install hardstanding surfaces to high traffic areas such as around waterers, gates, and hay feeders

Recommended Resources:
World Horse Welfare webinar “Recognising, managing, and preventing skin conditions in horses”
World Horse Welfare ‘Winter horse care tips’ [online article]
World Horse Welfare ‘Mud fever in horses’ [online article]

The information in this fact sheet was collated by the World Horse Welfare education team and verified by relevant industry professionals. We always advise that appropriate veterinary advice is sought for any equine should their health be in question or in an emergency.