

Internal Parasites of Horses

Internal parasites are likely the greatest single cause of death in horses and are often a causative agent in many digestive, respiratory, and performance problems. Though parasites are a constant problem, the severity of the problem can be lessened with a regular preventive program.

There are four parasites commonly found in horses: bots, strongyles, ascarids, and pinworms.

BOTS are the larvae (immature worms of the botfly). These flies are very common, so it is next to impossible for a horse not to be infected. During the warm months, adult botflies lay their eggs on the hair of various parts of the horse. Stimulated by the horse's licking, the larvae hatch and enter the horse's mouth and settle in the tissue around the back teeth or in the tongue. For about a month the larvae migrate throughout the body before finally reaching the stomach, where they attach to the stomach lining. Here they may cause light irritation; interfere with digestion, or in severe cases obstruction. The bot larvae matures and is eventually passed in the feces. The bots that leave the horse become adult flies in about a month and the cycle starts over. Botflies are killed by freezing temperatures; therefore a good time to deworm your horse is after the first "Hard Frost."

STRONGYLES refer to a large group of parasites called "blood worms". They are dangerous parasites because the immature stages are directly involved with the cause of many colic cases. The young worms migrate through the blood vessels of the intestine causing inflammation and sometimes thrombosis (blood clots) of the arteries supplying the intestine.

All age horses can be infected. This parasite's life cycle begins in the intestinal tract where the female lays her eggs. These eggs are passed out in the feces where they hatch into infected larvae. The infected larvae migrate onto blades of grass where a grazing horse ingests them. Once inside the horse the larvae migrates through the body (especially the arteries) eventually ending up in the large intestine. Here they develop into adults and pass eggs in the feces completing their life cycle. Even though infected horses are being fed they may lose body condition, weaken, and have diarrhea. They may also become anemic because the adult is a voracious blood sucker. This parasite is diagnosed by veterinarians from a microscopic examination of the horse's feces. Frequent dewormings are recommended to reduce the risk of serious problems associated with this parasite.

ASCARIDS (large roundworms) affect young horses more than mature ones. The long parasite (6-12 inches) can number in the hundreds in the horse's small intestine interfering with the horse's nutrition. Colic, coughing, and diarrhea may also result from ascarids.

Foals pick up infected ascarid eggs from feces of other horses. The young worms burrow through the intestinal wall taking about a week to migrate to the lungs. From there the young worms travel (often by coughing) up to the mouth where they are swallowed for the second time. They mature in the intestine to start the cycle anew. Foals should be treated first between 8 and 12 weeks of age, then every 8 to 12 weeks until they become yearlings to effectively control ascarids.

PINWORMS though less dangerous than other parasites are annoying to the horse. They cause severe itching around the anus. Adult worms crawl part way out of the anus to deposit their eggs on the adjacent surface. The eggs hatch outside the horse's body and become infective. This parasite is ingested through contaminated water, grain, hay or grass. Young worms mature in the large intestine in three to four months and the cycle repeats itself. Signs to look for with pinworm infection is rubbing of the tail- causing broken tail hairs and bare patches around the tail. Pinworms can be treated similar to strongyles and ascarids.

An effective parasite control program involves each and every horse on the farm. Ideally treatments should be scheduled at regular intervals from birth until death. Your veterinarian should be consulted to help establish a program that will be practical for your horse's teeth.