

Greasy Heel – Mud Fever

Greasy Heel/Mud fever is a common condition that affects horses living or working in wet, muddy conditions. The skin over the pasterns and heels becomes infected, resulting in scabby or weeping lesions which can be very painful.

Sometimes the infection extends to the skin further up the legs. White limbs are particularly susceptible. Mud fever is not a single disease but a collection of clinical signs associated with a number of different causes. Although very common, it appears in various forms and is not limited to horses that are literally paddling knee-deep in mud.

The condition can range from a mild skin irritation to very painful, infected sores. The disease can actually affect the whole body and is given different names depending on the part of the horse affected. When it occurs along the backs of horses that are kept outside without rugs, it is known as rain scald.

Greasy Heel is the term used to describe the condition when it involves the lower limbs, most commonly the back of the pastern and the heels, where it is seen as crusty scabs. The inflamed skin may discharge serum, causing the hair to matt, giving the coat a rough, un-groomed appearance. With severe cases, the skin at the back of the pastern may split open, producing deep horizontal cracks, commonly called cracked heels. Infection can enter these areas of damaged skin, resulting in a hot, swollen and painful leg and cause severe lameness. Firmly adherent scabs are found in the pastern and heel regions.



Scabs and weeping lesions typical of Greasy Heel

Greasy heel is also often confused with Pastern Leukocytoclastic Vasculitis (PLV) an immune disease which is made worse by sunlight, contact dermatitis etc and occurs on white pasterns.



The shaved leg of a draft horse with Pastern Leukocytoclastic Vasculitis (PLV) showing chronic irritation and thickened skin up the leg

There are many treatments for Greasy Heel. It is recommended that you seek guidance from a vet if the condition does not respond to basic treatment. It has to be remembered that with any condition for which there are a large number of possible treatments, it is often because nothing is a guaranteed to succeed!

Basic Treatment

The affected area should be carefully clipped of excess hair, taking care not to traumatise the skin further. This may be done with clippers or a good pair of curved scissors.

Then use an antifungal wash as directed and use a soft brush or gently rub to remove as many of the unhealthy, crusty scabs as possible. Any lesion scabs should be collected and thrown in the bin, and you should use disposable gloves as the fungus can spread to other horses. Next, gently rinse and then blot the skin dry with clean, absorbent tissue or paper towels. Rubbing it with a towel will be painful for the horse and could cause further damage to the skin. If it is severe you may need your vet to help by sedating the horse and giving painkillers.