



SUSTAINABLE PARASITE CONTROL

Reducing our reliance on chemicals for sustainable parasite control

Spring is a great time to be considering our horse's parasite control for the year ahead. This means making plans for their field management and a regular testing programme to protect them both now and in the future.

We've probably all heard the term 'wormer resistance' which describes parasites that have evolved so that they are no longer affected by the chosen worming treatment. Much like antibiotics this limits the effective drugs we have to control infection. Although there are many brand names there are only actually five chemicals licensed to treat horses in the UK and no new ones in development. This is a major problem facing the veterinary industry; if we end up with resistance to all our drugs then our horses will be at risk of death and disease from parasite burdens that we won't be able to treat. A potentially devastating prospect!

There are two important steps we can take to slow resistance and safeguard our horses:

1. Protect key medicines
2. Reduce the worm challenge in the environment

Protect key medicines

A parasite can only build resistance to a drug when exposed to it. If we only worm when necessary – using worm egg counts and other diagnostic tools wherever possible to reduce the frequency of chemical doses - that on its own will prolong the life of our wormers considerably.

Healthy adult horses can follow a very simple annual plan: worm egg count for redworm and roundworm every three months in Spring, Summer and Autumn. Blood test or treat for the possibility of encysted redworm in mid-winter, sometime between December and February, and after the first frost if you are also targeting bots.

Wherever possible we should reserve moxidectin (Equest) for this single winter dose and use other wormers through the rest of the seasons to target adult stages of small redworm and other parasite challenges. This will help preserve efficacy of this important chemical. Using it as a blanket wormer at other times of year it is akin to using a sledge hammer to crack a nut!

Test for tapeworm every six months with the EquiSal saliva test, treating only if results indicate. Keep an eye out for pinworm and sellotape test horses if you suspect a problem.

Treat only the horses who need it, giving sufficient wormer for the horse's weight. Exposing the worms to a dose of wormer that is not enough to kill them is a sure fire way to build an army of resistant worms.

Check for resistant worms; if a positive result is found, treat the horse then sample again in about 10-14 days. If the wormer has been effective the second count should be either 'no eggs seen' or very low.

Reduce the worm challenge in the environment

Just as important in our armoury against resistance is good husbandry and paddock management to break the lifecycle of the worms and reduce the reliance on chemicals. Simply put this means poo picking, poo picking and more poo picking!

Worm larvae passed in droppings hatch and become mobile within seven days at which point they leave the dung piles to re-infect the pasture. The milder and wetter the weather the further and faster the larvae can travel. Collecting droppings twice a week, even through winter is a sound investment in your worm control programme.

These additional steps will also help:

- Keep horses with the same grazing companions for herd stability. Rest and rotate grazing and don't overcrowd fields.
- Cross graze pasture with other species eg. sheep where possible.
- Keep new horses separate until tested and treated accordingly.
- Don't worm and move; after worming ensure horses stay on the same pasture for a few days to help slow down resistance.

Taking simple steps to beat resistance will help us to play the long game, preserving the efficacy of the wormers to give us many happy years of horse owning ahead.

Any questions please get in touch

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