

Ask A Vet: New Deworming Information

Sunday, December 28, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

What are your recommendations for deworming horses? We have been using Zimectrin paste regularly for several years, but two of our horses have a rougher hair coat than in the past. Could worms be causing this?

Dear Reader,

A rougher than normal hair coat can be a symptom of internal parasites, but then again, so could several other disease states we see in horses. Our recommendation is to do a fecal egg count with your veterinarian to determine if this might indeed be the issue. Intestinal worms have been developing resistance to dewormers at an increasing rate over the last decade or so. The widely held practice of rotating dewormer drugs every few months has likely contributed to this resistance. Also, there are no new dewormer drugs being developed at this time. Because of this, there is a concerted effort by the veterinary community to adopt a selective deworming program versus a rotational program. The goal of such a deworming schedule would be to decrease the number of times a particular dewormer is given and thus decreasing the chances of developing resistance to that dewormer.

Selective deworming programs rely heavily on fecal egg counts (FEC), which calculate the number of parasite eggs in an individual horse's feces. The frequency of FEC's can be tailored to your particular equine operation. A typical selective deworming program would pull a fecal on each horse in the spring, fall, and mid-summer. This would give you an idea about which horses are shedding large numbers of parasite eggs and which aren't. High shedders would be dewormed more frequently than low shedders. A general rule of thumb is that 80% of the eggs deposited on a pasture are put there by 20% of the horse population. By targeting these high shedders, we can eliminate a lot of the transmission of worm eggs and decrease the need for dewormers. It is still recommended that all horses be dewormed at least once a year, in part to treat for tapeworms which do not show up in a fecal exam. Your particular deworming program can be tailored to your needs by your veterinarian.

One of the hardest misconceptions to overcome is the idea that every horse should be 100% free of intestinal parasites at all times. This is just not true. Many horses have a natural ability to control their own parasite burden. Horses don't drop dead left and right from untreated parasite populations. All equine harbor some parasites and no amount of deworming is going to eliminate them. There is even some research that suggests that a low level of worm load is beneficial for a healthy immune system. The bottom line is that if we don't decrease the amount of dewormers we give our horses, we may not have anything effective left to use when we really need it.

-Dr. Wade Hammond