



Sarcoids

Sarcoids are the most common skin tumour of horses & are locally invasive tumours they do not spread to other organs. They are persistent and progressive skin lumps that occur mainly around the head, axilla and groin area, as well as developing in wounds where they can be confused with 'proud flesh' (exuberant granulation tissue). They affect breeds of all ages and both sexes. Sarcoids do not usually self-cure and affected horses often develop multiple sarcoids at once or serially.

Cause

Sarcoids are caused by bovine papilloma virus (BPV). However, it appears that the virus requires genetically susceptible horses in order to cause sarcoids; in other words, not every horse exposed to the virus will develop sarcoids whereas those that are genetically susceptible are likely to keep developing sarcoids.

As the susceptibility remains, horses that have been successfully treated for sarcoids often get them again. The virus becomes incorporated into the DNA of infected skin cells and causes transformation of those cells into tumour cells.

It is possible that sarcoids spread contagiously and this is something that has worried some people but, as yet the ability for sarcoids to transmit by either direct horse-to-horse contact or indirectly by flies is unproven. Although parts of the virus have been detected on flies whole virus has not been detected. Some owners of sarcoid-affected horses have run into difficulties registering horses at livery yards because of fears of transmission to other horses but, at present, there is no evidence to suggest that horses affected by sarcoids are a threat to others.

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Appearance and diagnosis

Biopsies are not worthwhile unless there is any doubt about the lump is a sarcoid or not. The reason for this is that all sarcoids look alike under the microscope and biopsy can make sarcoids more aggressive.

The main types are sarcoids are:

- Verrucose – a wart-like, greyish, scaly skin lesion that can appear singly or in groups, these sarcoids are generally not painful but can transform into more aggressive forms such as fibroblastic sarcoids.
- Occult – These are slow growing and have flat, scaly tumours and look like scars or ringworm. They are the least aggressive sarcoid type.
- Nodular – These are well demarcated lumps, which may be covered by normal skin or may be ulcerated. They have a spherical appearance and may have a wide, flat base or narrow stem-like base. They have a medium growth rate and their behaviour may change over time.
- Fibroblastic – These are aggressive tumours that grow rapidly and are locally invasive, possibly invading down into the tissues underneath the skin. They might not be well demarcated and often occur in clusters of tumours of variable size and shape. They have an irregular appearance and because they grow rapidly are often ulcerated.
- Mixed sarcoids are combinations of the above and it is fairly common for horses to develop multiple sarcoid types in one region or for there to be multiple sarcoid types present at different sites around the horse.
- Malignant sarcoids occasionally horses develop this sarcoid which are highly aggressive and spread locally via lymph vessels producing lines of sarcoids spreading from the original tumour site.

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Treatment

There is no universal best treatment for sarcoids which has resulted in many different treatments being proposed and used. The different behaviour of sarcoids means that different treatments are appropriate for different circumstances and that a 'one size fits all' approach to treatment is not appropriate.

As well as the type of sarcoid, factors affecting treatment options include the location and extent of sarcoids, treatment cost and the horse's temperament.

* Medical treatments include the immune stimulant Bacillus Calmette Guerin (BCG) vaccine (which is used to prevent tuberculosis) & Immunocidin Injection, injected into the tumour, the injectable chemotherapy drugs cisplatin and Mitomycin C which act by interfering with DNA copying in tumour cells, the topical chemotherapy cream AW4-LUDES ('Liverpool cream our preferred choice), Bleomycin Cream & Efudix cream.

* Surgical treatments include surgical excision, cryosurgery (freezing) and laser surgery. Surgical excision without additional therapy has poor success rates & majority of sarcoids still return following this approach.

There are various treatments, and the correct treatment must be chosen for each sarcoid because inappropriate treatment can make sarcoids more aggressive and may make the situation worse. Please ask one of our vets for the best course of action.

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