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SARCOIDS

Equine sarcoids are the most common tumors seen and account for approximately nine out of every ten skin tumors seen in horses. They are non-malignant (they do not spread throughout the body) but do grow larger and often spread and multiply locally. Their presence can cause irritation, interference with tack and loss of value to the horse. If knocked or rubbed, their surfaces easily bleed.

What do sarcoids look like?

Sarcoids can occur just about anywhere on the body but are most commonly found on the head, (especially around the eyes), the underneath of the abdomen and around the sheath, chest, ears and lower limbs. Single tumors may occur, or there may be number of them, either concentrated in one area or scattered over several parts of the body.

There are different types of sarcoids, and they can vary quite widely in appearance. **Flat** (sessile) sarcoids appear as round to oval, flat areas of roughened, hairless, irregular skin. The skin feels slightly thickened. **Fibroblastic** sarcoids are irregularly round, raised, firm lumps. They are usually smooth and hairless, at least over part of their surface, but smaller ones are sometimes covered with normal-looking skin. If the surface becomes damaged, the tumor will ulcerate and bleed, leading to scab formation. **Verrucous** sarcoids appear wart-like with an irregular surface. A horse may have different types of sarcoids at the same time and mixed-types also occur. Sarcoids can grow to become very large (over 8-10 centimetres), although most remain smaller than this.



Sarcoid tumor near horse's eye

Sarcoids can be similar in appearance to other skin tumors and it is necessary to submit a biopsy to a laboratory for analysis for a precise diagnosis to be made. If possible, it is usually preferable to remove the whole tumor in the first instance for laboratory examination. Sarcoids are often stimulated by a biopsy to grow rapidly.

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Why do sarcoids occur?

There is strong evidence sarcoids are caused by a virus. Some genetic families appear particularly susceptible to developing sarcoids more readily than others, but there is no difference in susceptibility between horses of different coat colors. Some breeds may be more susceptible than others.

Often proud flesh, the exuberant granulation tissue that often develops in healing equine wounds, transforms into sarcoids.

What treatments are available?

There are several options for treatment of sarcoids and more than one treatment may be used at the same time. The important thing to remember is that sarcoids have a great tendency to recur either at the site of removal or nearby. The choice of treatment will depend upon several factors:

- The number and size of the sarcoids present
- The part of the horse affected
- The facilities and drugs available

What methods of treatment are there?

Surgical removal

It is often possible to remove a sarcoid by surgical excision. This is usually done if there is only a solitary tumor with enough free skin left afterwards to close the wound. Approximately 50% of sarcoids treated this way re-grow subsequently.

Freezing (Cryosurgery)

The sarcoid may be frozen by using liquid nitrogen, which causes the tissue to die away. If the sarcoid is large, most of it can be cut away first (de-bulking), leaving only the base to be frozen. This method is more effective at preventing recurrence than surgery alone, but often results in the development of scarring and patches of white hair.

Laser surgery

Where available, surgical laser treatment allows the bulk of the sarcoid to be removed and the base eroded either in one step or the base eroded after de-bulking the main mass. There is minimal bleeding because the tissues are burnt, but healing can be slow. Scars will form but hair color is usually unaffected.

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Applying ligatures or rubber rings

It is possible to remove the bulk of some sarcoids, especially those with a short stalk or neck, by fixing a tight ligature around its base or applying rubber rings. The ligature cuts off the tumor's blood supply and it dies away or falls off usually 10 days to two weeks later. This method is useful for short-term control of relatively large sarcoids on the inside of the hind limbs or abdomen but does not usually give long-term resolution of the problem. This method requires a specialized tool for the application of small strong rubber rings. There may be some local swelling after their application but this usually subsides once the sarcoid drops off.

Radioactive beads or wires

This highly specialized technique is not widely used but can be effective particularly for eyelid sarcoids where it is necessary to try to save the eyelid. The radioactive treatment shrinks the tumor and may disfigure the eyelid. This form of treatment must be performed under specially licensed conditions.

BCG vaccine

BCG vaccine can be injected directly into sarcoids, often with useful results. Several injections over several weeks or months may be required. This treatment is aimed at provoking an immune reaction from the horse's body to destroy or reject the sarcoid tissue. It is most commonly used for eyelid tumors because, if effective, it allows the eyelid to be saved. There is often initial swelling and there may be skin damage following injections.

Chemotherapy

Specially-prepared cytotoxic (tissue killing) creams have been widely used to treat sarcoid tumors. These attack the abnormal cells in the sarcoid and are often highly effective. They can be used on smaller and flat sarcoids or larger ones after surgical de-bulking. Treatment usually takes 2-3 weeks.

No matter which treatment option is chosen, it can take many months to remove some sarcoids and the effect might not be permanent. Treatment may need to be repeated or changed if new sarcoids appear.

Should I buy a horse with sarcoids?

In addition to welfare considerations, sarcoids affect the potential value of a horse by interfering with tack, being unsightly, exhibiting chronic bleeding or oozing, drawing flies, and being costly to treat.

Sarcoids are much more significant than 'just a few lumps' and can be difficult and costly to deal with. If you think your horse or pony may have one or more sarcoids, ask your veterinarian for advice. Best results are achieved when a diagnosis is made and appropriate treatment is started early. Scarring is less obvious when the sarcoids are removed or treated when they are small.

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