

Common Equine Skin Tumors

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Horses can be afflicted with several types of skin tumors. Three of the most common, in order of occurrence, are sarcoids, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanomas. Depending on the tumor type, several different treatment options are available, including surgical removal and chemotherapy.

Sarcoids often appear as a wart-like tumor, and are highly locally invasive but not systemically invasive (metastatic). They can occur anywhere on the horse, but are most frequently found on the legs, abdomen, around the eyes, and on the ears. There are several different possible appearances, varying from a lump under the skin, to a “raw-appearing” area, to the more common “warts.” Sarcoids are a little different than most tumors, because they’re thought to result from infection with a bovine (cow) papilloma virus. Affected horses appear to have deficits in their immune system that allows the virus to gain access and result in the tumors. Therefore, one method of treatment is immune system stimulation. Immune stimulants can be injected directly into the tumor, which helps the horse’s immune system recognize the tumor as abnormal and destroy it. Other options, depending on the size and location of the tumor, are surgical removal, laser removal, freezing, and topical or injected chemotherapy. Unfortunately, reoccurrence is common with sarcoids.

Squamous cell carcinoma is another locally invasive type of tumor. Most squamous cell carcinomas involve the skin and tissues surrounding the eyes or the genitals. Horses with non-pigmented or white areas are more susceptible because of accumulated radiation damage from the sun. The tumors that develop in the tissues around the eyes often initially seem like an eye-infection because there is drainage or swelling, but close inspection can reveal the tumors. If the tumors are caught early, removal can be relatively simple, but more advanced tumors often require removal of the eye itself to prevent reoccurrence. Chemotherapy is often used in conjunction with surgery in this type of tumor.

Melanomas are most common in older grey or white horses; as many as 80% of grey horses will develop them at some point during their lives. They appear as nodules under the skin, and usually start under the tail or on the dock, but can also occur around the throatlatch, or in other areas. They can also occur internally. Most, however, are on the skin and are quite benign, and grow slowly over several years. They can interfere with defecation or breeding if allowed to get very large. These tumors can also be treated with surgical excision, laser surgery, freezing, and chemotherapy. Some melanomas respond well to treatment with oral cimetidine (Tagamet). The cimetidine can slow tumor growth, decrease tumor size, and prevent development of new lesions.

Early detection of equine skin cancers is key to a good outcome. If you note suspicious areas on the skin, especially around the head, eyes, or genitals, have a vet examine the area. Most areas of the skin are easy to biopsy in horses, and require only sedation and local anesthesia (numbing). Biopsies are sent to veterinary diagnostic labs, and results are often received within 3-4 days. Knowing the type of tumor aids greatly in planning for its safe removal. Removal of small tumors can be accomplished under sedation as well, unless the horse is fractious, or the tumor is in a difficult to reach location. Larger tumors usually require general anesthesia, and have a poorer prognosis.

Although sarcoids and melanomas are difficult to prevent, the risk of squamous cell carcinoma can be decreased by using appropriate sun protection. Fly masks are always a great idea, especially in pintos or other horses with white areas around the eyes. They protect against sun exposure at the same time they ward off insects. Owners can apply sunblock to pink noses during sunny days; some flymasks extend down over the nose to achieve the same effect.