



A Natural Approach to Equine Parasite Control

By Lisa Ross-Williams

With so many horse owners turning to a natural approach to horse care, more and more questions are being raised about parasite control.

- Do horses need to be routinely wormed with chemical wormers?
- What are the drawbacks of using chemical wormers?
- Why do some horses carry a heavy parasite load while others don't?
- Are there natural options to deal with parasites?

First, a peek at the differences in philosophy between conventional western medicine and a holistic approach to parasite issues. The conventional approach is to “attack the worms” directly with frequent toxic chemicals, often on a daily basis without knowing if there is even a problem. Whereas a holistic approach realizes that worm problems are a sign of imbalance and weakness in the body and therefore must be addressed before healing can occur.

Is there even a parasite problem?

Almost all the natural/holistic equine experts agree that periodic fecal exams are a great tool in developing a parasite control program. Frequent fecal checks can not only tell you if there is a high or low egg count, but can also allow you to monitor how well your program is working. This helps decisions such as whether any worming is necessary (don't worm unless there is a problem), the type & frequency of treatment (whether natural or chemical), and can also help gauge efficiency of your worming program or product (testing before and after using a wormer and

looking for significant drops in eggs). Absence of ova, especially after only a single test does not mean your horse is parasite free nor does one high egg count mean your horse is infested.

There are two basic fecal tests which are available; Quantitative and Qualitative. The quantitative method uses a powerful microscope with a modified McMaster slide technique and demonstrates a specific count (eggs per gram). This allows us to look at



Fecal Testing Set-Up

hard numbers and track any changes. The qualitative method is a basic floatation technique which simply shows the presence or absence of eggs. Many vet offices offer fecal tests, however this is something anyone can do themselves with some basic equipment which would include your microscope, modified McMaster slides, floatation solution and vial. See resource guide.

Opinions differ as to specific cut-off levels of contamination, but the guidelines we follow are: 50 EPG or less-Insignificant, 75-200 EPG-Low count, 225-600 EPG-Medium level, 625+ is a High count. The EPG is determined by taking the total number of eggs found and multiplying their sum by 25.

Remember, we are striving for a consistent low egg count, not a completely worm-free horse. **There is no such thing.** The best defense against high egg counts is a healthy immune system, proper nutrition & body mineral balance, and good stable keeping. Parasites are opportunists and it therefore boils down to the individual horse which is why prevention is better than treatment.

A Healthy Immune System; Your Horse's First Line of Defense

The immune system is your horse's army which protects against foreign invaders such as parasites. Unfortunately, far too many horses are compromised due to unnatural care practices, over-use of chemicals, stress and most often an unbalanced diet. In order to have a strong immune system, the diet must contain needed enzymes, vitamins and minerals. Equine nutrition is too complex to cover in this article and it is recommended you seek out the advice of an experience equine nutritionist (not just your feed store person or neighbor) or horse care consultant for a properly balanced diet. However, a few basic suggestions are included.

Since low Copper is a top culprit which contributes to low immune systems and allows for parasite infestations, it is often beneficial to add extra Copper using natural sources. Sources might include:

- Crushed Rosehips which are high in Copper and Vitamin C and valuable in boosting the immune system. 1-2 Tbs per day is adequate.
- Kelp/Seaweed is also a great source of Copper and Sulphur. 1 Tbs per day for average horses and half that for ponies and easy keepers.
- Garlic granules are loaded with Copper and Sulphur as well as having the action of helping to expel parasites from the body. 1-2 Tbs per day.

Probiotics should also be considered to help boost the horse's gut health which

creates a hostile environment for parasites.

Natural Support Options

Since your horse's immune system is its "Army" against invaders, natural support options are his "National Guard"; there to give a little extra support. After ensuring your horse's diet is balanced, making environmental changes if necessary, and doing periodic fecal exams, there are various natural approaches available if needed. Again, it is recommended you seek out the advice of a practitioner who is experienced in holistic horse care. Also note, it is preferred to use these options during a full moon cycle when parasites are the most active. Some support modalities include:

Homeopathy is a natural philosophy that follows the principle of "like can cure like" and these natural remedies work by helping the body's defense system help itself. Remedies are derived from natural sources; plant, animal, and minerals but are in an extremely diluted form.

Herbs can be an effective weapon in parasite cases and often a blend is added to feed for 5-7 days, often during the full moon cycle.

Depending on the specific herb, it can either be a vermicide (kills worms in the gut) or vermifuge (expels dead parasites and related debris from the body). With the advice of an experienced herbalist (which is important as some herbs have contra-indications and should not be used in certain circumstances),

herbs can be a very effective and gentle way of supporting the horse in controlling



Diatomaceous Earth, Pumpkin Seeds, & Garlic Powder

parasites.

Diatomaceous Earth is the skeletal remains of microscopic organisms which can be effective in a parasite control program because it is sharp to insects and parasites. Fed at ½ cup per day for 5-7 days, this substance will dehydrate the invaders.

Raw Pumpkin Seeds and Carrots also have worm expelling properties and good substances to feed at ½ cup each per day along with an herbal wormer for 5-7 days.

Drawbacks of the Conventional Approach

A cookie-cutter conventional approach of using chemical wormers on set time intervals has numerous pitfalls and can actually add to the problem. That is not to say there is never a time to use a chemical product, but it really should be used as a last resort and only when other environmental and diet changes have been made. It should be noted that many horses who are frequently chemically dewormed often have the highest parasite loads when tested. Some of the drawbacks of chemical wormers are:

- Over-taxes the liver and can kill off beneficial gut bacteria.
- Gives owners a false sense of security.
- Contributes to “Super Parasites” that are becoming resistance to common equine wormers.
- May inhibit the horse’s ability to develop a natural immunity through exposure.
- Can cause a quick kill-off which can result in impaction colics and high

levels of toxins from the dead worms.

- Can negatively affect the earthworms and beetles which are important to a healthy environment.

Views from a few natural & holistic experts

A majority of holistic experts agree on the main principles of equine parasite control; correct balanced diet, healthy immune systems, periodic fecal checks, and natural environments, but each has their own personalized programs and thoughts. Below are some quotes by well respected natural care and holistic folks:

Stacey Small

Equilite, Inc (manufacturer and distributor of all-natural herbal supplements)
www.equilite.com

"I do believe it is very important to stay on top of parasite control. The first thing I do is to pull fecals to see what types of parasites we are dealing with and at what level. I do not feel it is wise to just blindly worm with no point of reference for what we are dealing with. I have also found it very important to keep the immune system as healthy as possible. It seems to me that the weaker animals are the ones most plagued."

Catherine Bird, author of *A Healthy Horse, the Natural Way*

www.happyhorses.com.au

"When it comes to worms and intestinal parasites, I encourage my clients to use herbs to make their horse's gut less hospitable to these pests, and monitor their horse's internal health in case there is a necessity to use a pharmaceutical wormer. I am too wary on relying just on herbs, as I have seen blind faith in them not always protect a horse from infestation.

When horses are paddocked at home and not exposed to outside horses, I will suggest they incorporate herbs such as garlic and pumpkin seeds. However this does not mean feeding indiscriminately. As worm infestations can be cyclic, so

should your approach to using herbs. Old herbals recommend giving worming herbs on the full moon, and this tends to be the most effective way when you are working with the ebb and flow of nature. Herbs such as garlic can encourage other sensitivities so giving with specific intention is more effective than feeding endlessly “just in case”. Another herb that has been traditionally used is wormwood, however this bitter herb must also be used with caution as it can be toxic at too high a dose, and has had its accessibility restricted in many States.

Many of my clients now do a fecal count if they feel their horses need a wormer before administering. This way they can do a screening and know which worms they are also targeting and choose the most appropriate product. This has reduced their need to introduce chemicals to once or twice a year, if needed.

With aromatherapy, if I suspect a client needs to follow this path, we offer the horse carrot seed oil under his nose to gauge his interest. A horse that tries to lick or inhale this scent enthusiastically needs his ‘gut health’ addressed. It is time for an owner to review the horse’s ability to uptake and utilize the nutrients from its feed, and worms could be one factor that is lowering the horse’s ability to do so.

The other aspect that is very important with my work with clients is if their horse suffers parasites of any kind, what is this horse reflecting back to them to address in their life. Who in their life is eating away at their own spark and zest for life. Is there a work situation where they feel inadequate and not able to fully express? Is a friend or partner slowly demoralizing them where they want to explore an aspect of their own creativity? What is their digestive system health like? There can be many expressions of this approach and worth sitting back and reflecting upon if managing worms in your horse has become a chore or a frequent occupation. “

Mary Ann Simonds, holistic health consultant

www.mystichorse.com

“Working with Nature, understanding the life cycle and needs of parasites and thinking more symbiotically can almost eliminate the need for any destructive parasite control.”

Randi Peters, publisher Natural Horse Magazine

www.naturalhorse.com

“I have found that worms are not the problem - the horse is. Determining if a given horse has a worm problem is important - just because a horse has a positive fecal exam does not mean he has a worm problem. The occasional positive fecal does not send up an alarm for me; having a positive fecal exam with increasing numbers repetitively does. That tells me that the horse's immune system is declining, and he needs a health improvement with immune system boosting - a holistic approach - and changes in horse keeping methods

Things I have found helpful to minimize parasite inhabitants in general include:

- Natural living, natural foods, natural environment - no stall confinement
- Getting off the chemical dewormers merry-go-round - they further burden the eliminatory system and detoxification process, and do not allow horses to build a natural resistance
- Having free-choice minerals (including copper) and salt always available
- Adding digestive enzymes when feeding any pelleted or non-fresh feeds, or during times of stress
- Using pre- and probiotics wisely, in times of stress or if feed changes, or if ever on antibiotics.

Homeopathic remedies are great for supporting horses who tend to get worms, although (again) the best remedy depends on the horse and his symptoms.

- Equiopathics makes a combination dewormer remedy (available through Washington Homeopathics, 800-336-1695)
- Abrotanum helps expel roundworms.
- Filix mas is known for tapeworm elimination.
- Arsenicum album helps horses who have diarrhea with worms.

There are others

IF a horse has a worm problem and it is determined that a deworming is called for (parasite infestation), I would opt for herbs, with a naturopathic vet or herbalist's guidance, which can help the horse eliminate the parasites from the body gradually, avoiding a quick kill-off that could cause problems (such as intestinal impaction, eliminative organ stress). The appropriate herbs will also be supportive of the

bodily systems in the process, helping heal parasite damage rather than further burdening or damaging.

I believe only horses that are sick or imbalanced to some degree have problems with worms. Help your horse maintain optimum health and he will boot out worms himself.

The bottom line for successful parasite control is a happy, healthy horse. By getting back to a balance, natural approach to horses and using fecal exams as a monitoring system, the chances of parasite infestation is greatly reduced.”



Lisa Ross-Williams is a natural horse care consultant, clinician and host of the “If Your Horse Could Talk” webcast available at www.naturalhorsetalk.com. She is a seasoned writer and former Senior Editor of Equine Wellness Magazine. Along with her husband, Kenny, they share their small Arizona ranch with their beloved animals.

Lisa has dedicated herself to extensive research, as well as an exploration of hands-on experiences which included clinics, seminars and courses covering natural horsemanship, hoof care, dentistry, bodywork, homeopathy, iridology, essential oils and nutrition. Since then, she has earned her degree in Environmental Plant Science and has completed the Basic Homeopathy Veterinary course through the British Institute of Homeopathy.

Known to colleagues and friends as one who “walks her talk,” Lisa has positively influenced thousands of horse owners and grateful horses, sharing her knowledge of natural and holistic horse care.

Resource Guide

Fecal testing supplies & herbal blends: Farmstead Health Supply

www.farmsteadhealth.com

Homeopathic supplies: Washington Homeopathic. www.homeopathyworks.com
& Equiopathic dewormer

Herbal Blends: Earth Song Herbal Wormer www.naturalhorsetalk.com
Worms Be Gone www.meadowherbs.com
Worm Check Paste www.thenaturalhorsevet.net

Bulk Herbs: Herbal Com www.herbalcom.com



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• Homeopathy
• Equine Dentistry
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