



Best Practices for Parasite Control in Horses February 21, 2017

Traditional programs for internal parasite control in horses generally involved a dewormer treatment program whereby horses were routinely dewormed every 8 weeks according to a seasonal rotational schedule. Today this practice is considered “old school” and is discouraged by veterinarians. Much like over-use of antibiotics can lead to antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria, over-use of deworming medications have been known to lead to resistant populations of internal parasites. Without new medications entering the market to address this issue, the health of an entire community of horses can be put at risk by the development of drug resistant parasite strains. It’s every horse owner’s social responsibility to follow modern best practices to avoid over-use of deworming medications and help prevent the emergence of resistant parasites.

What do internal parasite control best practices look like? It starts with regular fecal analyses. A fecal analysis can detect and identify the eggs produced by many internal parasites including round worms, pin worms, thread worms, ascarids, strongyles and others. Once the parasite load is determined, and the parasite species are identified, appropriate deworming medications can be given that specifically target the parasites on board. If parasite eggs aren’t detected, then no medication is generally given, though the exception to this rule is detailed below. All of the horses in the herd should be tested around the same time and those receiving deworming medications should be treated on the same day to help reduce the over-all load on the pasture and lower the likelihood of herd re-infestation.

The shedding of internal parasite eggs through feces can vary greatly from one horse to another within the same pasture. Therefore, it’s important to perform a fecal test for each individual animal. Some horses demonstrate good natural resistance to internal parasites and rarely shed parasite eggs in their feces. Others have very low resistance to internal parasites and get re-infected with them on a regular basis. These horses are termed “high shedders.” High shedders not only require more regular deworming treatments, but if left untreated, their feces will raise the parasite load of the whole pasture putting other horses at greater risk of parasite infestation. Diligent removal of manure from barn yards and pastures will further reduce the pasture parasite load and may potentially lead to less frequent need for the use of deworming medications.

When starting a fecal analysis management plan, extra diligence is required for the first 12 months to identify the high shedders in the herd. A fecal sample should be collected from each horse and analyzed once every three months. After the first year, the horses identified as low shedders can be put on a twice yearly fecal examination schedule testing only in the spring and early winter. The moderate shedders and heavy shedders should continue to be tested and treated accordingly every three months. Any new horse entering the herd should be tested immediately prior-to or upon arrival and then on a three month schedule with the herd for the first 12 months.

Each horse should be dewormed according to their own fecal test results. Your veterinarian will advise you on how to treat each horse. If a horse is carrying a very heavy load of parasites, several consecutive gentle deworming treatments may be required instead of one heavy hitting broad spectrum dewormer

in order to reduce the risk of inflammation and colic. Often follow-up fecal analyses may be necessary to monitor the progress and effectiveness of the medications in such cases.

Once a year, in the early winter, when nights are consistently below freezing, every horse in the herd should receive an annual deworming treatment to eliminate the parasites we cannot detect through a fecal analysis. Generally the treatment is done with an ivermectin/praziquantel deworming product to target bot fly larvae and tape worms. It's important to do this treatment during freezing weather because the tape worms passed in the manure are still alive and can re-infect the herd during warmer conditions. The parasites die quickly in freezing temperatures. It's important to note that just because every horse will be treated this one time of year, that doesn't eliminate the need to do fecal testing prior to treatment. Any horses identified with a high parasite load, or resistant parasite species will need to be treated differently.

It's important to work closely with your veterinarian to develop a deworming protocol that's right for your farm and herd. For additional information on modern equine internal parasite management, go to www.aaep.org and click on "Parasite Control Guidelines."