



April 2024 Sarcoids

Sarcoids are skin tumours that can occur anywhere on the horse. They account for more than 40% of all equine cancers. They are locally invasive but don't spread to other organs.

What do they look like?

This can be very variable as there are lots of different kinds of sarcoid! Any skin lesion that has been on your horse/pony or donkey for a few weeks may be a sarcoid.

What causes sarcoids?

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.

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What type of sarcoids are there?

The main types are sarcoids are:

- Verrucose – 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 three types 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.
- Occasionally horses develop malignant sarcoids which are highly aggressive and spread locally via lymph vessels producing lines of sarcoids spreading from the original tumour site.

How do we treat sarcoids?

Treatment is very dependant on what type of sarcoid we are dealing with and where it is located. The most important thing about treating any sarcoid is to ensure you try the best treatment first as they can become very aggressive and spread further if the wrong treatment is used!

Different options include:

Lazer surgery- depending on the locations of the sarcoids we may be able to do this under sedation or we may need the horse to have a short general anaesthetic.

Mitomycin injection- act by interfering with DNA copying in tumour cells

Banding- only suitable for sarcoids that we can get a ring around. Often mitomycin is used as the same time.

Chemotherapy creams- require multiple visits and sedations

Bacillus Calmette Guerin (BCG) vaccine injected into the tumour- acts an immune stimulant

Zylexis vaccine- acts as a general immune stimulant to encourage the body to fight the sarcoids



Can we biopsy sarcoids before initiating treatment?

It is not advised to biopsy sarcoids as this can make them more aggressive and harder to treat.

Why shouldn't we ignore sarcoids?

Sarcoids are progressive and can become painful and ulcerated. There is also a potential link of spread of sarcoids between different horses. Sarcoids can impact the value of your horse as well as it's welfare. Sarcoids can also spread to places that interfere with the use of tack such as on the girth area or face. Your horse is also at risk of knocking or damaging the sarcoids themselves and potentially making the sarcoids worse.

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