

Factsheet: Canker

Canker is a serious bacterial infection that affects the frog, bars and sole of the horse's foot. Fortunately, it is not a common condition, but it can be very difficult to treat. The causative bacterium is still unknown however it is suspected that the bacterium is anaerobic (grows in the absence of oxygen) and it infects the superficial epithelium of the hoof (the outermost tissues). It causes excessive proliferation of the tissue and an overgrowth of the horn. This is in contrast to thrush which affects the same regions of the foot, but the bacterium destroys and eats away at the tissue resulting in foul smelling tarlike discharge throughout the frog and sulci (grooves on either side and centre of the frog).



Clinical signs

- Grey coloured tissue that is moist and spongy in the sulci
- Cauliflower like lesions throughout the frog with cottage cheese like exudates
- Horses may stamp the affected foot
- Depending on the depth of infection there may be swelling of the pastern and lower limbs
- Surprisingly lameness is rarely encountered

Diagnosis

- The classical clinical signs often inform the diagnosis.

Treatment

Treating canker can be challenging and often carries a poor prognosis. There is no consensus on the optimal treatment protocol, but successful outcomes have been achieved by:

1. Extensive superficial debridement (cutting away all the abnormal tissue). This often requires general anaesthesia. No systemic medication will treat canker if superficial debridement is not performed.
2. After debridement the wound needs to be dressed daily, often sterile gauze swabs soaked in diluted povidone iodine are used. The amount of time this takes varies hugely from patient to patient and will depend upon how the wound is responding and how much discharge is being produced.
3. Topical antimicrobials can be applied to the dressings. Metronidazole has been reported to work in some cases.
4. Canker thrives in moist conditions, so it is extremely important to keep the feet clean and dry.

Prevention

- Good stable management and regular foot care and inspection.
- Regular foot trimming to avoid the development of long heel conformation and to keep the frog healthy.
- Provide an area of dry hardstanding for horses at pasture.

We'd really value your support

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We believe that prevention is better than cure and that through education we can achieve better outcomes for horses and their owners.

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