

Cellulitis in the Equine

Description: Cellulitis is the severe swelling of a horse's limb due to a bacterial infection in the soft tissues of the leg. It most commonly involves one leg and is often seen in a hind limb. There are many different species of bacteria that can lead to the infection, but *Staphylococcus* is the most common isolate. The bacteria enter through a break in the skin. A cut, scrape, puncture or even pastern dermatitis can lead to bacterial invasion and infection. Sometimes the break in the skin is so small it cannot be found on the leg. Edema will form in the limb when the bacteria and toxins that are released create an inflammatory response in the body. This is to be differentiated from 'stocking up', which occurs in horses being stalled for a length of time. This swelling will not cause lameness and will go down with exercise.

Clinical Signs: Cellulitis is characterized by warm diffuse swelling that is painful to the touch. The swelling often extends above the horse's knee or hock. The swelling occurs quickly over a number of hours. Horses will often also have a fever, be lethargic and inappetent. They usually show some degree of lameness and can present as non-weight bearing. In extreme cases the horse may have a yellow discharge, serum, oozing from the limb due to compromised blood vessels.

Diagnosis: Most of the time a diagnosis can be made by your veterinarian from clinical signs alone. Blood work may be helpful, especially if the horse is showing systemic signs of illness. Other more advanced diagnostics may be needed to rule out other injuries, such as radiographs or ultrasound. Persistent cases may benefit from culturing the discharge from the limb to be able to choose the appropriate treatment.

Treatment: Early treatment is critical in cases of cellulitis. There are two main focuses in treating cellulitis. The first is eliminating the infection in the leg and the second is reducing the inflammation. Horses are placed on antibiotics, often a combination of oral and injectable, and anti-inflammatory drugs. Nursing care is recommended in the form of cold hosing and wrapping to reduce as much of the inflammation as quickly as possible. When the horse is comfortable enough they should be hand walked and turned out to encourage movement.

Prognosis: Most horses recover well from cellulitis with prompt and appropriate treatment. After a severe case, the horse's leg may remain chronically enlarged due to scar tissue, even after the infection is eliminated. Horses that have been affected by cellulitis are more prone to infections in the future. There is no good way to prevent infection aside from good hygiene and wound care. Early detection and recognition is key to a good prognosis.