

TAPEWORMS

*These deadly internal pests have increased over the last decade.
It cannot be overstated that the most commonly used dewormers are not effective against equine tapeworms.*

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Although once considered to be a benign inhabitant of the equine gastrointestinal tract, recent research suggests that the equine tapeworm, *A. perfoliata*, may be a significant cause of colic. In fact, reports of colic associated with tapeworm infections have increased over the last decade. Although the cause of this rise is unknown, some have attributed it to the use of dewormers that do not address tapeworms. A thorough grasp of the life cycle of the tapeworm, diseases caused by tapeworm infections, and techniques used to diagnose infection is essential to understanding the importance of addressing tapeworms in your deworming program.

TAPEWORM LIFE CYCLE

Because the life cycle of equine tapeworms requires an intermediate host, they cannot be transmitted directly from horse to horse. The intermediate host for the tapeworm is a mite that lives in pastures, feeding on horses' manure. The tapeworm's life cycle begins when these mites ingest tapeworm eggs in infected horse manure. Horses then ingest the mites while grazing. During digestion, tapeworms emerge from the infected mites and attach themselves to the intestinal lining of the horse to complete their maturation.

Once the tapeworms mature, they shed their eggs into the manure of the horse. The cycle begins again when mites in the pasture consume the eggs. This cycle takes about four to six months to complete and infects horses of nearly any age. Horses between three and five years and older than 15 years harbor the greatest number of tapeworms.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH TAPEWORM INFECTION

Adult tapeworms attach to an area of the horses' digestive system known as the ileocecal junction and cecum. This is the area of the intestine where the end of the small intestine (i.e., the ileum) connects to the cecum. Attachment of the worms to the lining of the intestine causes inflammation, ulceration, and thickening of the tissues in the affected region. Damage to the intestine causes it to malfunction in a variety of ways.

The inflammation may be severe enough to obstruct the passage of feed through the area. Alternately, through a mechanism not fully understood, damage may cause the bowel to twist (i.e., cecal torsion) or telescope within itself (i.e., ileocecal intussusception). Either way, bowel obstruction or bowel abnormalities can be a life-threatening cause of colic.

DIAGNOSIS

Generally, diagnosis of internal parasite infections relies upon the microscopic identification of parasitic eggs in the feces. Often times, however, tapeworm eggs are not present in a given fecal sample despite tapeworm infection. At the present time, there is no consistently reliable test for tapeworm infection in the horse. Researchers are attempting to develop a blood test to diagnose equine tapeworm infections.

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

Since there is no dependable way to diagnose a potentially life threatening tapeworm infection, it is currently recommended to routinely deworm horses with an anthelmintic effective against tapeworms. It cannot be overstated that most commonly used dewormers are not effective against equine tapeworms. Ivermectin (Zimectrin, EqValan), moxidectin (Quest), and fenbendazole (Panacur) do not kill tapeworms. The only licensed products effective against equine tapeworms are pyrantel pamoate (Strongid) and pyrantel tartrate (Strongid C). In order to control tapeworms with pyrantel pamoate, a dose of two to three times the label dose is recommended. Pyrantel tartrate should be administered daily according to the label directions. Praziquantel is another drug that has been shown to be effective against equine tapeworms. A single dose of this drug may be effective in controlling tapeworms. Your veterinarian will have more information regarding the use of praziquantel to control equine tapeworms.

SUMMARY

- Tapeworms can be a life threatening cause of colic.
- Infections are mediated by a free-living pasture mite.
- Tapeworms damage the portion of the digestive system known as the ileocecal junction and the cecum.
- Most common dewormers are ineffective in controlling tapeworms.
- Deworming horses with two to three times the label dose of Strongid or praziquantel at least once in fall after grazing on summer pasture is currently recommended to keep infection levels low.
- Alternatively, daily deworming with Strongid C is effective in controlling tapeworms.

Please note: Some veterinarians do not recommend deworming broodmares in their last trimester of pregnancy—depending upon the type of dewormer.

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