

Doing Battle Against Sarcoids

Find out how to treat the wart-like growths once and for all.

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While grooming your horse you discover a gray, wart-like growth on your horse's skin. It doesn't seem to be causing your horse any pain, but it's not attractive and, after monitoring it for a few weeks, you determine that it's continuing to grow in size. Is it cancer? Is it a skin disease? Is it curable?

Chances are it's probably a sarcoid. These non-cancerous skin tumors appear on horses of all colors and breeds. They come in two forms: a nubby gray surface that has a sort of cauliflower appearance and a flatter fleshy type that may eventually resemble the look of proud flesh. To confirm that a skin growth is indeed a sarcoid, your vet will perform a simple skin biopsy. Once that's the diagnosis, there are several treatments available.

One choice is surgery, however, the procedure must remove all affected skin and that may be difficult. Any sarcoid cells that remain will simply return. Cryosurgery utilizes liquid nitrogen. Applied carefully, it freezes the sarcoid which then dies and sloughs off. The process often kills off hair follicles, too, so that a bare spot remains or the hair that does return is white. Finally, there is a pair of newer approaches. One is to use chemotherapy drugs and inject them locally into and around the sarcoid. Another is the use of a topical cream containing natural alkaloids and other ingredients. The substances cause a localized immune response that causes the horse's body to reject the sarcoid tissue.

Not every treatment works for every sarcoid, which means you may have to do some experimentation. Keep in mind, too, that regardless of your treatment plan the sarcoid area will look worse before it eventually looks better. So don't do battle with a sarcoid a month before a major horse show. As the sarcoid dies and peels away from the skin, it will leave behind an oozing lesion that requires some daily care until it heals. But eventually the majority of sarcoids can be defeated once you and your vet come up with a war plan.