



RW EQUINE VET

Lice Infestation in Horses

Lice are a common cause of itching and skin irritation in horses, particularly during the **colder months (autumn to spring)**. While lice infestations are rarely life-threatening, they can cause significant discomfort and can spread easily between horses if not treated promptly.

What are lice?

Lice are **tiny parasitic insects that live in a horse's coat and feed on skin or blood**. They are **species-specific**, meaning horse lice only affect horses and cannot spread to humans or other animals.

Two types affect horses:

- **Biting lice (*Damalinia equi*)** – feed on skin debris and hair.
- **Sucking lice (*Haematopinus asini*)** – feed on blood and can occasionally contribute to anaemia in severe infestations.

Lice spread mainly through **direct contact between horses**, although they can survive for some time in **rugs, grooming equipment and stable environments**.



Figure 1 and 2 - Patches of hair loss on the body and neck crest

When are lice most common?

Lice are **most commonly seen during winter**, as they reproduce best in cooler conditions. Warmer summer temperatures in the horse's coat tend to reduce lice numbers, which is why outbreaks are typically seasonal.

Signs of lice in horses

The main symptom is **itchiness (pruritus)**. Horses often try to relieve this by rubbing or biting themselves.

Common signs include:

- Rubbing against fences, walls or stable doors
- Patchy hair loss or a “**moth-eaten**” **appearance** of the coat
- Broken or rough hair, especially along the neck, shoulders, flanks and legs
- Scurf or crusting on the skin
- Irritability or restlessness

In severe cases, horses may become **run down or lose condition**, particularly if sucking lice are present.

You may also be able to see **lice or their eggs (nits) attached to hair shafts**, especially around the **mane, forelock and tail**.

How are lice diagnosed?

Diagnosis is usually straightforward and is based on:

- Finding **live lice in the coat**
- Seeing **eggs attached to the hair**
- Examining hair brushings under magnification if needed.

Because other skin conditions can also cause itching, veterinary advice may be required if the diagnosis is unclear.



Figure 3 - Presence of eggs in the horse's forelock.

Treatment

Lice infestations are treatable, but **all horses in contact with the affected animal should be treated at the same time**, even if they are not showing signs.

Treatment usually involves **topical insecticidal products**, commonly containing pyrethroids such as permethrin or cypermethrin.

Important points:

- **Repeat treatment is essential**, usually every **10 days**, because most products kill adult lice but not the eggs.
- Multiple treatments are needed to eliminate newly hatched lice.
- Always follow veterinary guidance and product instructions.

Stable management and prevention

Good management is key to controlling outbreaks.

Recommended measures:

- **Treat all horses in contact**
- **Wash or change rugs and blankets**
- Clean grooming equipment between horses
- Steam-clean or wash contaminated rugs (heat kills lice)
- Avoid sharing grooming equipment
- Monitor horses regularly during winter

Horses that are **stressed, underweight or unwell** may be more susceptible to infestations.

When to contact your vet

You should seek veterinary advice if:

- Your horse is **very itchy or losing hair**
- The skin becomes **sore, infected or crusty**
- Treatment does not resolve the problem
- Multiple horses are affected

Early treatment helps prevent lice spreading through the yard.

References:

Biggin, T.A., Bristol, A. and Coles, G.C., 1999. Parasite control in horses of members of pony clubs. *Equine Veterinary Education*, 11(6), pp.318–321.

Pilsworth, R.C. and Knottenbelt, D.C., 2004. Louse infestation. *Equine Veterinary Education*, 16(5), pp.228–230.