

GREASY HEEL

by Peta Oxenbridge, Winning Colours Farm.

Finally light at the end of the tunnel....

The more you scrub the more the disease worsens and the same vicious cycle occurs. I have read on forums of owners visiting psychiatrists due to horses ‘mud fever’ and have also heard of thousands in vet bills due to misdiagnosis.

I am writing this paper firstly and foremost to help all the horses out there in dire straights. These are the ones that get their open wounds of “greasy heel” scrubbed and picked and then over the counter or home made ‘remedies’, harsh



chemicals and/or detergents put on them only for the scabs to come back far worse and then it be done to them again; with this cycle going on until the horses are so leg shy and they end up suffering psychologically (any wonder!).

This paper is written for these horses – the ones with **SWOLLEN** limbs, the ones that are **LAME** due to “greasy heel”.

And I am also writing this for the owner that is told to “scrub and get the scabs off at any cost” and that “it is for the horses own good” . The more they scrub the more this disease worsens and the same vicious cycle occurs. I have read on forums of owners visiting psychiatrists due to horses “mud fever” and have also heard of literally thousands of dollar vet bills with elite show horses still having to be scratched from Grand Nationals and Royal Shows.

If you and your horse sounds like the above and your horse **has swollen inflamed legs** let me first say that I am going to finally give you a resolution. That there will be **NO SCRUBBING** because this makes it worse. That your

horses underlying reason for the scabs on the legs **IS NOT DUE TO STANDARD GREASY HEEL**. Let me say that most likely everything you’ve been told to do and doing to treat it is making it worse (I suppose you already know this!).

Your horse is having an **AUTO-IMMUNE** response. By scrubbing and putting detergents, creams, lotions and potions on is a bit like picking and scrubbing eczema on people – what do you think would happen? - exactly what is happening to your horse – it is getting far more inflamed and a further auto-immune response and inflammation is occurring which is giving the greasy heel bugs a place to thrive. But if you treat like greasy heel - picking and scrubbing, you are making the whole process happen and at a faster rate.

Why is your horse having an auto immune response? There are many things that can trigger an auto-immune response. The trigger can be environmental, topical or systemic (eg ingested, inhaled) in origin. In my observations the three main factors that are the number one cause of Leukocytoclastic Vasculitis (yes, it has a name and it is not greasy heel!) are **1. SUNLIGHT and 2. HIGH LUCERNE / PROTEIN DIETS. 3. RUBBING, SCRUBBING AND TOPICAL IRRITANTS (ie Greasy Heel treatments).**



1. Sunlight or UV light is one of the biggest causes of this disease and no amount of what I am going to tell you below will work if your horse's legs see full sunlight. I have fixed a broodmare with severe lesions in the middle of summer by simply putting her in a paddock where the grass was belly high so her lower limbs were never in direct sunlight. The paddock also had plenty of shade trees, and putting one other quiet horse in the paddock with her that preferred shade was all the treatment that was required in this instance. (Note this was middle of summer with no morning dew).

Most horses spend the majority of their time where they are closest to other horses or where they feel the safest / happiest and this often is in full sun. Given the opportunity these horses know the shade is best for their legs but their need for companionship of other horses or the need to be with the herd will see them standing in full sun for hours on end. This must be managed first and foremost as it is often the sunlight alone that causes this affliction. **Please note paddock boots won't cut it. Your horse needs open air on the legs.**



2. High lucerne diets

cause a huge increase in calcium in the horses system. Lucerne is full of calcium and calcium and copper are minerals that work in unison with each other – a bit like a seesaw. If one goes up, the other goes down or more importantly the need for the other increases, in this case copper. Show horse are often fed as much lucerne as they can eat. This creates depletion in copper and/or a further need for additional copper. Most commercial feedstuffs (grain mixes and pellets etc) are fortified with added calcium which further increases the need for copper.

Many pathogens are unable to live on a blood supply with adequate copper circulating and this is exactly the case for the “greasy heel” bug. Deplete the copper in your horses system and you are giving the pathogen the perfect environment for them to grow and multiply.

Increase the copper in your horse's diet and you are giving them an environment they cannot grow and multiply.

There is a great book by Pat Colby called Natural Horse Care that elaborates on what I am saying. I agree with most things in the book (except the part of the amount horses need to eat as our show horses need more food to be competitive!). She advises how and how much copper needs to be fed. **Please note that copper sulphate is a poison and I take no responsibility for its use or misuse.**

I feed copper sulphate, dolomite and yellow sulphur powder routinely as a part of my feeding regime. I do believe as does Pat Colby that it is necessary with our Australian soils. As well as the fact that our feeds are grown with superphosphates which inhibit the plants uptake of copper from the soil. Extreme care does need to be taken when feeding copper and more so if your horses paddock contains the weed Patterson's curse and you must always feed Dolomite with copper to avoid copper poisoning.

As Pat Colby's book suggests, for a full grown horse I feed 1 TEASPOON of Copper Sulphate (Blue Stone) daily, 1 Tablespoon of yellow Sulphur powder daily and 1 Tablespoon of Dolomite in each feed every day. I also feed apple cider vinegar with added garlic to make them shine from the inside out and to make the copper palatable. Please note I do not feed MSN or any other calcium supplements. (I call yellow Sulphur powder 'poor mans msn' which I should probably call 'smart mans msn' because I believe it does the same thing for a fraction of the price!)

How I feed is:- I add the yellow sulphur powder and dolomite to the chaff (white and green chaff) and whatever other concentrates I am feeding (pellets and grain etc). The copper is water soluble, so I add this to some water along with the apple cider vinegar. A bit of molasses or whatever can also be added to this blue coloured water if I require a sweetener. I then dampen the whole feed with this or if I make a separate mash I use this as the mash water. The volume of water I use is usually determined by the horses preference! Mix and feed out immediately. Don't make it up in the morning to feed out that night as the dolomite will neutralise the copper within half an hour it is reported.



Sulphur is a natural anti-inflammatory and helps the horse resist bacteria. Its importance should not be overlooked.

If your horse is in the acute or chronically infected stage I would suggest reducing the amount of lucerne hay and increasing the amount of oaten hay in their diet.

Keeping the horses legs from prolonged periods of direct sunlight and rebalancing the calcium copper in the diet will be enough to stop them getting this affliction in most cases. However, if your horse already has Leukocytoclastic Vasculitis you will need a holistic approach and will need to stop the immune mediated response. Treating with systemic and topical applications is necessary. A cortisone cream with a local anaesthetic to stop the pain and immune response is needed. Neocort is my cream of choice which will need to be prescribed by your local Veterinarian. This cream should be **put on as gentle as possible and over the top of the scabs – hardly touching the leg.** A soft, wide paint brush works well. Within minutes the horse will feel relief from the pain. If the limbs are extremely swollen and painful you can hose the legs with cold water to numb the

legs before applying the cream. (YES, WATER!) Cortisone injections can be also given however I have not used them myself and should not be used if the horse is to be entered in competition. Secondly and just as important, FiltaBac cream which is like a zinc sunblock cream with drying and antibacterial, antiseptic and wound protectant properties can then be put on over the top of the Neocort. Apply these two creams daily and over the top of the day prior's application. Don't be tempted to pick scabs as they rise up before they drop off. The final thing to speed up recovery and assist your horse is antibiotic injections as you would for any infection. For a full size horse 20 – 25 mls 2 x per day for a couple of days then 1 x per day for a total of 5 or 6 days should suffice. I use standard procaine penicillin and twice daily / daily injections as stated above - not the long acting penicillin, however, this is just personal preference and I have no antidotal evidence that it is better.

In Summary: If your horse has swollen inflamed legs that look like greasy heel.

Balance Calcium and Copper. I do this by feeding copper, dolomite and sulphur powder.

Cortisone and lignocaine and antibiotic cream topically (Neocort) followed by full sunblock cream (FiltaBac) and antibiotics systemically. Cortisone can be given orally or systemically also.

Keep horse out of direct sunlight

Do not scrub or pick scabs.

Some points to assist:-

Whenever you clip the back of your horses pastern or your horses whole white stocking/sock put FiltaBac cream on the area for a few days afterwards.

Prednoder cream **does not work on the legs** for this affliction as it does not assist in the drying out of the lesions even though it has cortisone in it. Secondly to this as it is an oil base it allows the sunlight to penetrate and due to the chlorophyll makes the horses legs more photosensitive, acerbating the condition. Horses with sunburn, mud fever or Leukocytoclastic Vasculitis on their noses however I use predoder on with terrific results. I always put a full face mask on the horse immediately after application. (I use flyveils by design with nose piece) The nose is always healed within days.

You need a holistic approach. Keeping the horse out of sunlight won't work if their copper /calcium is out of balance. Feeding the copper won't work if the filtaBac is not applied and the legs get direct sunlight. Putting the Neocort and FiltaBac on won't work if the grass / morning dew is rubbing off the cream allowing the sun to penetrate for a while. Putting Neocort on without the FiltaBac won't work if the horse is outside.

You cannot use other topical creams as remember you are not dealing with standard greasy heel if your horse has

inflamed and swollen limbs. In saying that I do make my own 'Neocort' using lignocaine, cortisone and neomycin penicillin in a base cream to save \$\$.

Do not put the copper or sulphur or any other home remedy on topically. Once again we are not dealing with standard greasy heel in this article. This will only increase the immune response and worsen the condition. So to will clipping and scrubbing.

Horses with only the onset of "greasy heel", I put FiltaBac on the legs every second day without any other treatments and this usually works if the immune response is from the sun.

No need to think your horse can not be out in the paddock again (ie full sun). With FiltaBac on they can usually stay in their normal living arrangements. For the more chronic cases, once the immune response has gone and the hair is growing back they can then be put back into their normal living arrangements with FiltaBac. The season and weather will be an important consideration in determining which paddock or situation will facilitate recovery.

I hope I have given hope to some of those of you that have felt hopeless by this immune mediated disease. I too have been to hell and back with this disease. I had a horse critical when no "greasy heel" treatments were working. A Vet told me to turn the horse out on a paddock of lucerne and it was Spring time. The heavy morning dew wet the hair on the legs (the ones that were left) which without copper in the diet gave a warm moist environment for the pathogen to thrive. The legs were getting full sun all day as the paddock had no shade trees. The lucerne acerbated the calcium copper imbalance (obviously I didn't know what I do now at the time). The open wounds that followed one week of spelling were a horror story to say the least.

We are told to get the scabs off and put this on and that on and we try all and everything and our poor four legged friends suffer psychologically. Is it any wonder? Try scrubbing your own open wounds and put everything on from copper to sulphur to domestos to tee tree ointments on and see how you feel!

Please note all this information is not written for standard greasy heel which has no swelling as a general rule. However in saying this my methods will fix standard greasy heel also as it not only fixes the immune response part of the disease but it will kill the greasy heel pathogen that presents itself with this disease.

I would love to hear your thoughts and comments on this paper. You can write to me at peta@winningcoloursfarm.com.au.

Peta Oxenbridge
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What Sulphur Does:

- Aids in necessary oxidation reactions in the body
- Coats intestinal tract so parasites lose ability to hang on
- Constituent of bones and teeth
- Contributes to fat digestion and absorption
- Controls acidity in stomach ulcers
- Disinfects the blood
- Helpful in stopping urinary tract infections and constipation problems
- Helps the body to resist bacteria
- Helps the liver produce choline
- Helps with hypersensitivity to drugs
- Important for carbohydrate metabolism
- Increases blood circulation
- Increases body's ability to produce insulin
- Increases energy, alertness, mental calmness and the ability to concentrate
- Necessary for developmental and neurological processes
- Needed for the manufacture of many proteins, including those forming hair, muscles, and skin
- Needed for the synthesis of collagen
- Needed to regulate blood sugar
- Permits muscles to heal
- Protects against toxic substances, harmful effects of radiation, and pollution
- Protects the protoplasm of cells
- Reduces muscle cramps and back pain
- Relieves allergies to food, and pollens
- Removes inflammation
- Scavenges free radicals
- Slows down the aging process
- Speeds wound healing
- Stimulates bile secretion

CLIENT TESTIMONY

"Peta, as you know during a conversation we recently had, I was totally devastated about the possibility of scratching my Grand National & Sydney Royal qualified gelding from the Large Show Hunter Hack classes. When we were chatting you immediately told me about "Auto-Immune Response" and within a day we had purchased all the products needed and within 9 days we had turned around our situation. Nixon was so bad he had completely stopped eating for a week and a half and all our competition hopes were dashed. All that matter to me was his welfare NOT the competition scratches, but with your help, I'm holding high hopes. We have three & four weeks until those events come around and I believe we will be there and that's purely because of this information. THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Michelle Grosser-Oertel, Charleston Park

