

The Yin Yang of Poop!

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I was recently at a holiday party that was filled with horse owners, and there were two topics of conversation that almost always find their way to a common ground; hay and poop. Of all the things we do caring for our horses, these two items consume much of our “horse” time and, often times more than the horses themselves, especially if we have collected a few of them.

I am going to focus on one of these topics because there has been a sudden interest in it. I have answered many e-mails concerning it recently, and since you’ve already read the title of this article, yes, we will be discussing poop!

As a young girl working at a riding stable, I would sometimes walk the fields with Mrs. B, the owner. She would always have a stick she used as a walking stick and as we walked, she would poke the manure piles and inspect them. She would point out which ones were from who and whose was healthy and whose was not. Now back in those days if you saw something wiggling around upon inspection you didn’t run down to the feed store and buy a paste wormer for your horse. These things did not even exist. If your horse had worms that you could see, he was pretty bad off and usually thin. Worming was done by the Vet with a long tube sent down the horse’s nose and a bottle of piperazine was poured down the tube directly into the stomach. Almost always, the horse got better, and this was something that was rarely done. It wasn’t until the 1980’s that the barn I managed considered using paste wormers for horses. They were new and expensive, so again, used rarely.

Now we are in a time where you can purchase a tube of generic ivermectin for under \$2.00. Magazines, feed stores, advertisements and catalogs sell a vast array of different chemical products to “deworm” your horse and encourage regular rotational administration as a preventative as well as a pelleted daily form. The ease and affordability of these drugs (yes they are drugs), I believe, gives the horse owner the sense of taking good care of their horse, but also provides a false sense of security. No one ever talks about the possibilities of any “side effects”, and no one would likely even recognize one if their horse exhibited one or possibly more. They are listed in the folded paper in the box the tube came in, but no one really pays attention, after all, the Vet, the barn manager, the trainer and other boarders recommend it and give it to their horses, and all goes on as normal. Or does it?

I attended a workshop at a local college that was put on by Pfiser and Purina Feeds, and the morning segment was on “Parasitology”. What the cycles of different species

of worms were, how they affect the horse, etc. We got to see what eggs and larva looked like in a microscope, and in the end the recommendation was a blanket one for everyone there. Put your horse on a small dose of daily Strongid and deworm in the spring and Fall with Equimax paste wormer. It has the most effective dose of praziquantel for killing tape worm eggs- 14% as opposed to the “other brand” that only had 7%. I bought into it, and did it for a while on one horse. He gained a lot of weight, too much weight in fact, and eventually had a bout of laminitis. Now, I am not attributing the chemicals as the sole cause of the laminitis, but I was to learn that it was one of the straws on the horses back.

As a Barefoot Hoof Care Specialist, a large part of my work is rehabilitative. Gathering history on a horse often reads as a litany of exposures and treatments with chemicals and drugs. Worm medicines are drugs, remember? Everything stressful that happens to the horse is almost always recorded in his hooves. Those rings you see in the hoof wall, pink lines, horizontal abscess exit cracks- they all mark events that tipped the balance of health. If you see these lines or rings close together, and some appear to be deeper or more wavy, the horse has been sending out distress signals of stressors in his body—the domino’s are beginning to fall and we all go merrily on our way until Buddy comes in from the pasture limping and we cry, “What happened?” missing all the red flags that lead up to the disaster. Drugs and chemicals affect the delicate balance of acids and beneficial bacteria in the horse’s GI tract. These beneficial microorganisms exist in a “yin and yang” type scenario with parasites. As long as the horse’s immune system is up to par and everything is in balance, all is fine and everything stays within the confines of health.

So what does poop have to do with all of this? What does poop have to do with laminitis? Poop is also an indicator of our horse’s health. Remember, I learned this from Mrs. B, but now I can look at poop on the outside like she taught me, knowing which horse it belongs to and knowing if it is normal for that horse. And, with a microscope and a FEC (Fecal Egg Count) kit, I can look into the microscopic environment of the poop and get a bigger picture of health or the lack of it.

There are many great articles written about Fecal Testing, and I am going to include links to them at the end of this article because I want you to read them. We need to stop listening to the rhetoric that tells us that dumping chemicals into our horse’s body every 6-8 weeks somehow is beneficial, because from my perspective in a rehab case, or any case for that matter, it is the total opposite! Education is the key, and somehow we were lead to believe that drugs impart health and that our horse’s bodies are incapable of functioning as they were designed without our help. Do you take a tylenol or hydrocodone pill because you “might” get an ache or pain? This is what we are doing when we indiscriminately deworm our horse’s with a chemical thinking they “might” have worms. When stressors such as chemicals and drugs disrupt that balance, the horse’s GI tract cannot function properly and we have colic, ulcers, diarrhea, toxic build up of improperly digested material, a leaky gut and you guessed it—Laminitis.

I can find out in 45 minutes behind the microscope whether or not my horse needs to be wormed with a chemical, with herbs or not at all, and guess what? So can you. All you need to get started is what I used to get started when I learned to do this in school. 1-A binocular microscope with a mechanical stage and a magnification of 100x <http://www.amscope.com/?gclid=CODUme7Bs6YCFdx5QodjBiloA>. 2- A FEC Kit <http://www.farmsteadhealth.com/microscope.html>. There is also the modified McMaster slide method. <http://www.vetslides.com/EPGfecalkit.html>, or you can go to www.eggzamine.com for info and tools. I have taught clients how to do tests, and I offer it as part of my Natural Boarding in Paddock Paradise Clinics.

Fecal testing is only part of the whole picture in helping our horses stay healthy. The goal is to have a consistently low FEC with no clinical symptoms. There is no such thing as a worm free horse, and that should never be the goal. The only way they can develop a resistance to parasites is to have them in proper balance with everything else. The **number 1 defense against a parasite infestation** is a healthy immune system. This can only be achieved with a proper diet that respects the physiology of the horse, freedom to move in an environment with herdmates with the majority of their life being lived as a HORSE. **The next most important item** is manure management. If horses live, lay eat or stand around in manure all the time, you have already lost the battle. At my barn we pick manure up along the Paddock Paradise track system 2 times a day and put it in small piles in places the horses have chose as latrine spots. Two times a week we remove it from the environment. We spread it in farm fields adjacent to our property, and when we cannot spread we compost it for fertilizer in the pasture in the spring. Composting manure generates heat, and the high heat will kill parasites, their eggs and larva, and you are left with a great fertilizer. As an added bonus, if you feed your horses the mineral supplement I recommend, what they do not use and poop out, helps put some trace minerals back in your fields, giving you a healthier pasture, and garden if you choose to use it there too.

So, **the next item** is either sending out poop samples for quantitative testing, asking if your Vet offers this service, or learning to do it yourself. The importance of fecal testing cannot be understated. You will know if your horse has a problem, what kind of problem and what to do to remedy it. Every horse is different so some horses may need nothing, some can do fine with herbs or homeopathy, but very high infestations may need to be treated with a chemical, and depending on how high the FEC and or the appearance of worms in the poop, the age and health of the horse will dictate the treatment. It can be very dangerous to worm a horse with a worm infestation. The huge die off of worms can cause colic, impaction, and create a toxic overload for the liver. Your follow up FEC's will tell you if, and how well what you did worked. It will take time to work out a plan for each horse. There is no need to blindly deworm when we can know for sure. As a matter of fact, horses that have been dewormed chemically on a regular (6-8 week or daily) basis are the ones who most often carry the highest FEC's, because they never had an opportunity to build a natural resistance. We need to understand nature and work with it, if we truly want a healthy horse.

Please go to the following websites for further study on how to proceed from here:

<http://www.earthsongranch.com/viewContent.asp?idpage=4>

<http://www.equi-animalherbs.com/>

www.eggzamin.com

Go to my website www.nativehoof.com to see when I will be doing clinics/ presentations that include hands on demonstration of fecal egg testing, or drop me an e-mail at geri@nativehoof.com.

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