



Hearn Veterinary Services

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Are Tapeworms a Problem on Your Farm?

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Anoplocephala (tapeworms) are a common intestinal parasite of horses in North America. The importance of tapeworms as a cause of disease in the horse has been controversial, but recent work has shown that horses with tapeworms were 3.45 times more likely to have ileocecal colic, than horses without tapeworms.

How common is this problem in Ontario?

A survey of fecals from incoming horses on one large thoroughbred farm in Ontario, using the Cornell Wisconsin centrifugal fecal floatation technique, showed that 12% (56/451) of the fecals were positive for Anoplocephala, before worming. Tapeworm eggs were present in fecals in all months of the year, and no significant seasonal variation was detected. Because tapeworms only shed eggs intermittently, research on this technique has suggested that it was only 25% accurate, and the simple gravitational fecal floatation technique has been reported to be considerably worse. Therefore it was suspected that one in every two horses coming onto this farm was actually infected.

A new diagnostic method was needed to identify more of the worms that were present in the intestines but testing negative because they were not shedding any eggs. Therefore, a technique of worming with a double dose of pyrantel pamoate and doing fecal examinations 24 hours later was developed, and found to be significantly more accurate in identifying which horses were really infected.¹

Do your horses have Tapeworms?

Since it is easy to underestimate the prevalence of tapeworms, one should use caution in determining whether a herd is free of tapeworms, for several reasons:

1. The centrifugal fecal floatation technique has a poor ability to identify horses carrying tapeworms (25% accuracy), and the simple gravitational fecal floatation technique is considerably worse.
2. Tapeworm eggs are only sporadically released from the tapeworm segments (proglottids) prior to being shed in the feces.
3. Some farms have endemic infestations while others may not yet have had the problem introduced.

Treatment

To assess the problem on your farm, de-worm the horses with a double dose of pyrantel pamoate and then collect fecal samples the following day. Submit the samples to the lab for a centrifugal fecal floatation exam. This provides the best estimate of whether your horses are infected with tapeworms. If you detect no tapeworms, retest again next year. If you find tapeworms, consult your veterinarian on the design of a deworming program to manage the problem.

¹ Hearn P, Hearn E: A Simple Diagnostic Technique to Better Determine the Prevalence of Tapeworms. Journal of Equine Veterinary Science, 15:3, 1995, 96-98