xZEquine sarcoids

The equine Sarcoid is a commonly occurring skin tumour that has been heart-ache for horses and their owners for centuries. Sarcoids are in fact the most common skin tumour of the horse. Although common, sarcoids vary greatly in their size and appearance, the nature in which they grow and the way they respond to treatment. It is this variability that makes sarcoids such a challenge for both owners and vets.

Some important facts about sarcoids

- Sarcoids are common
- All equid species are susceptible - even donkeys and zebras
- Although sarcoids are a type of tumour (cancer) they do not metastasise (spread) to organs other than the skin.
- A horse with one sarcoid may well develop more
- Sarcoids can develop anywhere on the horse’s skin, but more common sites include the chest, groin, sheath and face (especially around the eye and mouth)
- Sarcoids are likely to recur, in spite of treatment
- Trauma of any nature to a sarcoid is likely to aggravate it
- No two sarcoids are the same. They can be unpredictable in all aspects of their development. There is no ‘magic cure’ for sarcoids. Each sarcoid needs to be assessed on an individual basis.

Types of sarcoids

There are 6 broad classifications for equine sarcoids. They include occult, verrucous, nodular, fibroblastic, malevolent and mixed. It must be remembered that no two sarcoids are the same and sarcoids definitely don’t read the text book, so many individual tumours may contain characteristics of several different types.

Occult

Occult sarcoids appear as roughly circular hairless areas of skin. They often are quite subtle early in their development and sometimes difficult to recognise.
Verrucous sarcoids are ‘wart-like’ in their appearance. They are often greyish in colour, the skin can crack easily and flakes of scale can often be rubbed off from the surface. They can appear singularly or in groups that merge into larger lesions. Manipulation of verrucous sarcoids is usually not painful.

Nodular sarcoids are firm round nodules that can appear anywhere on the horse’s body but are often seen in the armpit, on the inside edge of the thigh and groin as well as under the skin of the eyelids. They can be singular or multiple and quite variable in size. Nodular sarcoids are usually covered by a layer of normal skin but can also be ulcerative. They are usually attached to the skin overlying them but sometimes they are freely moveable under the surface.
Fibroblastic
Fibroblastic sarcoids are fleshy masses that grow quickly, bleed easily and often have ulcerative surfaces. They are seen anywhere on the horse’s body and can develop rapidly from milder sarcoids such as verrucous and nodular forms.

Fibroblastic sarcoid on the inguinal area (there are two other sarcoids in this region, can you see them?)

Malevolent
The malevolent sarcoid is the most aggressive of all the types. It can rapidly spread over a wide area of the horse’s body and grow in size just as quickly. The most likely appearance of the malevolent sarcoid is that of ulcerative nodular-like lesions grouped in large bundles. This condition can be so aggressive in nature that often there are no treatment options. Thankfully malevolent sarcoids are very rare.
Mixed Sarcoid

The term mixed sarcoid is essentially describes a lesion that shows qualities of two or more different sarcoid groups. Sarcoids are commonly described as mixed many of them will demonstrate characteristics of different types.

Mixed sarcoid on the ventral abdomen. The left side of the sarcoid (blue) appears to be occult whereas the right side (black) has more of a verrucous appearance.

Treatment

Unfortunately there isn’t a magical cure-all treatment for sarcoids. According to sources, there are over 40 different sarcoid treatments world-wide ñ this clearly demonstrates that there is no single method that will be effective in each and every case. We must remember that each and every sarcoid is different, they are unpredictable by nature and no matter how similar two sarcoids are, what treatment works for one might not work for the other. It is extremely important to remember that each sarcoid needs to be assessed by a vet before any treatment is started. Inappropriate treatment could convert a simple sarcoid into something very nasty very quickly.

Benign Neglect

Sometimes your vet will advise you just to monitor a small sarcoid that has recently developed. He or she may suggest that you leave the sarcoid alone and watch for any signs of development or growth. Some sarcoids may stay very small without developing much at all for years and years, so occasionally benign neglect is the treatment of choice. Of course, if the sarcoid starts to grow your vet will develop an appropriate treatment strategy to get on top of the problem as quickly as possible.
Surgical removal
Surgical removal of sarcoids is certainly a viable treatment but it always must be
done with caution as failure to completely remove the sarcoid will predispose to its
recurrence, often more aggressively. The decision to remove a sarcoid surgically
weighs on many factors including the type of sarcoid, its location, vital structures near
by and how the sarcoid might be impinging on the horse’s life. Surgical removal may be
done under heavy sedation in the field or it might need to be performed under general
anaesthesia. Depending on the surgeon and the location and nature of the sarcoid, it
might be removed by a variety of means including sharp excision with a scalpel, cautery
or even laser removal.

AW4-LUDES “sarcoid cream”
AW4-LUDES cream, simply known as sarcoid cream, is a topical chemotherapy
treatment containing the active ingredient 5-fluorouracil. It also contains a variety of
heavy metals, cytotoxic chemicals and natural plant oils. The cream is only available
via special veterinary prescription from the University of Liverpool. Due to its relatively
good efficacy and a high demand for the product it may take several weeks to arrive and
treatment be commenced. The cytotoxic nature of the cream makes it quite dangerous
to use, as such only vets are permitted to apply the product. A typical treatment course
involves 4 treatments with the 1st and 2nd treatments 24hrs apart followed by the 3rd
48hrs later and the 4th 48hrs after that. Side effects of the cream are minimal and
usually involve localised swelling. If this occurs anti-inflammatory drugs will be given.

Sarcoid before treatment with “Sarcoid cream” and result 3mths later.
Cryosurgery

Liquid nitrogen can be used to freeze a sarcoid in certain cases. Cryosurgery involves rapidly freezing and then slowly thawing tumours in order to kill off the rapidly dividing cells whilst sparing the normal cells. It can be time consuming and only effective on small superficial lesions such as occult sarcoids.

Intralesional Cisplatin

Cisplatin is a chemotherapy drug that has shown reasonably good results when injected directly into the sarcoid. The drug is mixed with oil to give it slow-release properties and injected into nodular-type sarcoids.

Ring Application

By applying an elastrator ring around the base of pedunculated sarcoids the blood supply to the sarcoid can be disrupted and often the sarcoid will fall off. This technique is minimally invasive but does have the potential to encourage regrowth.

Hopefully you now have a better understanding of the nature of sarcoids and the options for their treatment, enabling you and your vet to come to the right decision for your horse. Have a better understanding of this complex condition that has been plagueing horses for centuries and your knowledge in recognising the condition early coupled with your veterinarians expertise will result in a favourable outcome for both you and your horse.