

Down on the Farm



Tailor Your Deworming Program to Your Specific Conditions

by **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**

There is no one “perfect” or best deworming program or schedule for all horses or all regions. Each horse owner must try to figure out, often with the help of a veterinarian, what kind of program is best for his own horses and individual situation. Mature horses won’t need the same kind of program as foaling mares and young horses. In the latter group, a big concern will be ascarid control to keep young horses from developing heavy infestations of roundworms. These are rarely a problem in mature horses because they have developed some resistance. Bloodworm control (large strongyles) and small strongyle control is of prime importance to all horses.

Whether your horses are stabled or pastured will also make some difference in your program, as will the size and type of pasture. A large dryland pasture may not require the intensive parasite control program as needed on

a small pasture where the horses are more confined and eating in the same areas over and over again.

Season, climate and latitude will also make a difference. The conditions that help or hinder worm population proliferation will vary from region to region and from season to season. Hot, dry weather tends to kill the immature stages of many internal parasites. For instance, the newly hatched bloodworm larvae that are trying to climb up onto blades of grass where they can be eaten by a horse may perish in hot dry weather before they can get safely inside the horse’s gut, especially if the horses are roaming a large pasture and not constantly eating the grasses around their own droppings.

By contrast, warm and moist weather (such as typical spring or fall climate in many parts of the country) is ideal for the immature worms and the eggs hatch swiftly—so the tiny larvae can scramble up onto the grasses to be eaten. Spring and fall are therefore the times that parasite control in these

regions should be at its peak, to prevent the egg-laying that would otherwise contaminate pastures with millions of eager worm larvae.

The prime period for worm infestations can be thwarted if horses are diligently dewormed during April through August or September in the northern regions (or even as late as November if you have long, wet falls), and September through April in southern regions where the wet season is during winter. During this peak worm season, you can minimize the population explosion of bloodworms by using either standard dewormers at four week intervals or ivermectin at eight week intervals.

During cold weather in the northern regions the worm situation is not such a problem as in winter and a person can get by with longer intervals between dewormings. The cold does not kill the worms, but they do not thrive and grow. The eggs tend to become dormant instead of hatching, waiting until the weather warms up, as

there is no green grass to climb onto.

To keep the worms at bay, it's wise to keep pregnant mares dewormed, worming again with ivermectin on foaling day (soon after foaling) so as to halt the movement of the small stongyles (that were dormant in the mammary tissue) into the milk to infest the young foal. It's also good to start deworming foals for ascarids early—at two months of age or even sooner—and continue treating them diligently on a regular schedule every few weeks until the youngsters are past a year of age. After that, the deworming should be more geared to interrupting the life cycle of the bloodworm.

In some regions you may also need to combat tapeworms, and this will require different drugs—most equine dewormers will not affect tapeworms. Life cycle of tapeworms depends on orbatid mites, the intermediate host. Horses infested with tapeworms pass the eggs in manure. In regions with mild winters, the eggs hatch year

round. The mites take in the tiny immature tapeworms. A horse that eats grass infested with tapeworm-bearing mites then serves as host for the young worms to continue their development within the horse. Pyrantel is effective against tapeworms if given at two to four times the dosage required for other worms. Another drug that is effective is a canine deworming product, posiqantel (Dronsit). It can be given as instructed for dogs, with dosage adjusted to the horse's weight. However, check with your veterinarian just in case.

Work with your veterinarian to plan a deworming program that will be effective for the horses in your climate and situation. Young horses need more diligent protection than mature horses. Warm climates present year-round problems with many parasites that are merely seasonal problems in cold climates. Your veterinarian can advise you on new drugs that can be used.

You may also want to do some fecal testing for egg levels before and after deworming, to find out if your farm has

a problem with worm resistance to the drugs you are using. Ivermectin and some of the newest drugs have not yet shown any problems with worms developing resistance, but on many farms the traditional dewormers (especially the benzimidazoles) have become less and less effective, due to the development of resistant types of worms.

A regular deworming schedule (with drugs the worms are not resistant to) and diligent pasture management, will keep a horse relatively free of internal parasites. Usually only one to five percent of the worm population on a farm is actually inside the horse. The majority of eggs and larvae are in the pasture, waiting to get inside a horse. In small areas where horses are confined, cleaning up the manure at least twice a week can greatly reduce the chances of reinfestation. The battle against parasites is constant, but an understanding of their life cycles and the weapons provided by modern research can certainly help you keep these pests from becoming a health hazard to your horses.

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