



Sarcoid FAQs

1. What is a sarcoid?

The name sarcoid covers a spectrum of skin tumours with different clinical appearances and behaviours – they are all basically the same condition which adds to the complexity of the disease. Sarcoids should be viewed as a type of skin cancer, and there are 6 different types of sarcoid.

2. Can the disease be spread from one horse to another?

It is not known whether sarcoid tumours are transmissible between horses. It has been reported widely that sarcoid is transmissible between horses, but this is a highly complex facet of the disease. Given that a high proportion of horses seem to be genetically liable to the disease and only a very small number is actually affected, the concept of transmissibility remains open to considerable doubt.

There is no justification at present to worry about horses with sarcoids in contact with those without because little is known about the potential for transmission to other horses.

3. Can a horse (either mare or stallion) that is affected with sarcoids be used to breed?

The heritability of the “liability to sarcoid” is probably certain – some families of horse have a severe problem and others do not. It is probably unwise to breed from severely affected horses. Until we have established the full nature of the genetic involvement and until we can test for these specifically, there is probably no point in withdrawing all sarcoid affected horses away from the breeding pool since the absence of sarcoid on an individual horse at the time of the examination may not mean that it is not still genetically liable to the disease.

4. What is the risk to foals if their dams have sarcoids?

Like all horses contact with an affected horse increases the risk. Foals are clearly in very close contact with their dam. The groin/udder region is commonly affected and so mares may have various forms of sarcoid that are in direct contact with the foal during nursing.



Affected mares that are bred should be carefully examined and treated to ensure that the sarcoids are as small as possible when they foal. Bleeding, ulcerated sarcoids are the most risk to the foal. The risk is almost certainly magnified enormously if flies are not controlled.

The risk to healthy foals does not appear to be high, but some foals will be genetically more liable to the disease than others. If the family / breed line has high tendencies to sarcoid then the foal will be at most risk.

5. Can a mare be treated for sarcoids whilst pregnant?

Most treatments involve some risks! Often surgical treatments require sedation of even general anaesthesia and these can carry risks to the unborn foal. Drug treatment – whether by injection or topical application carry additional risks. By definition, anything that can alter or kill cells could do the same to highly fragile and susceptible cells in a developing foal. The risks are low but are very DEFINITE! That is why drugs and even white wine are avoided as far as possible during human pregnancy. The vet will provide guidance.

Treatment with chemical drugs of any form should probably be avoided in the first 120 days of pregnancy.

6. I have found a sarcoid on a horse I want to buy – what must I do?

If the horse is perfect in every other way do not necessarily condemn it out of hand; consider the whole package and bargain with the seller to get the best possible price. The value of an affected horse can be lower than an unaffected horse – this may not apply to high performance (racehorses etc) animals.

The horse will not be insurable with respect to the disease after purchase – check with the insurance company before finalising the purchase.

Treatment is likely to be expensive and ongoing, no matter what method is used to treat them. No treatment is 100%. Repeated treatment at intervals over the whole life of the horse are likely to be required.

7. I've been told that flies spread sarcoids, is that true?

The sires where sarcoid develop suggest that flies may be a component in the pathogenesis of the disease but how the way in which they are involved is unknown. There is no proof that flies are in fact involved at the present time but sensible fly control is probably wise.



Because sarcoids multiply and commonly occur where flies feed, it seems likely that they are involved in the epidemiology of the disease. Flies preferentially feed on open and verrucose sarcoids.

8. Do horses get sarcoids from cattle?

Advice to avoid cattle contact is of dubious value and practicality. Many cases have no history of cattle contact at all. However, de novo sarcoids are theoretically possible and indeed, have been reported when horses have been in contact with cattle. Flies may be an important mechanism for transmission of BPV-1 viruses to horses where, in a few cases, they may cause typical sarcoid.

9. When should I check for sarcoids on my horse?

Sarcoids are commonly reported to multiply on a horse over the summer and grow over the winter. The best time to check your horse for sarcoids is in the springtime prior to summer turnout.

10. My horse has a sarcoid, will his performance at shows be affected?

Sarcoids may have metabolic effects or cause physical/functional problems although the lesions themselves do not appear generally to be painful. Neither do they cause itchiness (pruritus) as a rule.

Some sarcoid affected horses perform less well than they should and an affected horse may return to its true performance potential when all the lesions are resolved. This implies that there may be some systemic effects from the disease.

Ulcerated, bleeding and infected lesions will almost inevitably have some deleterious effect on the horse as a result of the physical loss of plasma / blood. Rapidly growing sarcoids will also be a significant metabolic demand on the food and metabolic resources of the horse.

11. I have just treated my horse for a sarcoid, will it come back?

A horse that has any sarcoids at all is, by definition, liable to them and probably remains so for life. No horse that has, or has had, sarcoids can categorically be considered permanently cured (except perhaps the few horses that 'self-cure' at an early age).



12. My friends' horse had a sarcoid and it just disappeared – will my horses' do the same? If I just leave it alone will it go away by itself?

A few cases (around 5 in 100) 'heal' spontaneously with complete disappearance of all lesions. A few individual lesions can resolve on their own even when others on the same horse do not. There is no predictable time scale for this to occur – some cases will resolve totally within days after having been affected for years.

Horses that totally resolve spontaneously can then usually be regarded as being 'immune' to the disease. This does not apply to horses treated for the disease (no matter how effective the treatment is) in which recurrences and new lesions are to be expected. This also doesn't apply to cases where a single lesion (usually nodular) 'pops-out' from time to time.

13. How can I confirm the diagnosis – is it sarcoid or not?

Most sarcoids can be recognised by an experienced vet just by their appearance. However, it may be more difficult to confirm the earliest occult lesions where there is only a single lesion. There are mistakes that can be made by 'assumption of sarcoid' or missing a sarcoid because there are other conditions that look very similar!

A diagnosis can be confirmed by biopsy of the lesions. Biopsy should only be taken where the diagnosis is doubtful and where the treatment selection that follows will be adjusted according to the findings. Your vet will advise on the most appropriate steps.

Biopsy may be contraindicated because some sarcoids become highly aggressive following any interference.

14. Is sarcoid a virus?

Virus-like genetic material has been found in a high proportion of sarcoids but no virus particle has yet been identified or isolated. This may be explained by the fact that the virus is not well adapted to the fibroblast – papilloma viruses usually affect the outer skin layers (the keratinocytes) and where the viruses are active in keratinocytes a papilloma develops. There are plenty of virus diseases that affect the outer layers of the skin – many of which have yet to be well categorized.

The epidemiology of sarcoid is not completely and solely supportive of a simple virus cause. The possibility of transmission might be expected to be much more common if the disease was caused by a patent virus and furthermore we would expect some sort of immunological response to the virus prior to self-cure – just as occurs in the true equine viral papilloma.



Affected horses do not mount any immunological response to the putative virus involved and so conventional virus vaccines are unlikely to be effective.