

EQUINE SARCOIDS



WHAT ARE SARCOIDS?

Sarcoids are the **most common skin tumour** seen in horses. They are **locally aggressive**, meaning they can invade the surrounding skin and recur after treatment, but they **do not spread internally** to organs like some other cancers. Sarcoids can affect **horses of any age, any breed, and any coat colour**. They are often particularly frustrating for owners because they may **appear suddenly, change in size or appearance** over time, or **remain stable for long periods before progressing unexpectedly**.

WHAT CAUSES SARCOIDS?

Sarcoids are strongly associated with **Bovine Papillomavirus (BPV)**. The virus is believed to **enter through minor skin trauma or wounds**, where it interferes with normal skin cell growth and can lead to uncontrolled local tissue proliferation, resulting in sarcoid formation. Importantly, **not all horses exposed to BPV will develop sarcoids**, as some individuals appear to be genetically or immunologically predisposed. Sarcoids are not considered contagious between horses in the traditional sense; however, transfer of the virus via damaged skin is thought to play a role in their development.

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WHAT DO SARCOIDS LOOK LIKE?

One of the biggest challenges with sarcoids is that they **don't all look the same**.

They may appear as:

- Flat, hairless or scaly patches
- Wart-like, thickened skin
- Firm nodules under the skin
- Fleshy, ulcerated or proud-flesh-like masses
- Lesions that bleed, rub or fail to heal

Because of this variation, sarcoids are often mistaken for wounds, scars, or infections.

There are **four types of sarcoid** - occult, verrucous, fibroblastic, nodular, or they can be mixed. Each type has a different appearance and may require a different approach to treatment.



Occult Sarcoid



Mixed Sarcoid



Nodular Sarcoid



**Fibroblastic
Sarcoid**



**Verrucous
Sarcoid**

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EPIDEMIOLOGY – WHY SOME HORSES GET SARCOIDS

Sarcoids are more commonly seen in **young to middle-aged horses**, particularly those with **recurrent skin trauma** or those that already have sarcoids elsewhere on the body. **Environmental and seasonal factors** also play an important role, as **flies may act as mechanical vectors** for the virus, warm weather increases skin irritation and rubbing, and poor wound healing can allow viral entry. For these reasons, it is common to see **sarcoids change, flare up, or worsen during the summer months**.

WHERE DO SARCOIDS COMMONLY OCCUR?

Sarcoids can develop **anywhere on the body**, but are commonly found:

- Around the eyes and ears
- On the legs
- Under tack areas (girth, saddle, bridle)
- On the chest, sheath or udder

Areas exposed to pressure, rubbing, flies, or repeated trauma are at **higher risk of progression**.



WHY EARLY ASSESSMENT IS IMPORTANT?

Sarcoids are **not something to ignore or self-treat**.

Early **veterinary assessment** allows us to:

- Confirm whether a lesion is likely to be a sarcoid
- Assess type, behaviour, and risk of progression
- Develop an appropriate management plan
- Reduce the risk of aggressive growth or recurrence

Repeated interference – such as cutting, picking, banding, or home remedies – can significantly **worsen sarcoids** and make future management more difficult.

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REFERRAL SERVICES

At Elite Equine Vets, we offer a referral service to **Professor Derek Knottenbelt** at **Equine Medical Solutions**. Professor Derek Knottenbelt is a specialist in equine internal medicine based in the UK. This service involves a thorough history and high quality photos uploaded to a portal, an accurate diagnosis made, and a treatment protocol developed. Regular follow up photos are then uploaded to the portal and one year of case support is included in the referral fee.



HOW ARE SARCOIDS MANAGED?

There is **no single management approach** that suits every sarcoid, as treatment decisions depend on several important factors including the **sarcoid type, size and location, rate of change**, and the horse's **temperament and intended use**. Careful assessment of these variables helps guide an appropriate and individualised plan.

Management options may include:

- **Careful monitoring** in selected cases
- **Surgical** management
- **Chemotherapeutic** management regimes
- **Topical** applications
- **Slow-release injectable** therapies
- **Combination approaches** tailored to the individual horse

The goal of treatment is always to **minimise recurrence, irritation, and long-term complications** while achieving the best possible outcome for the horse.

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WHAT SHOULD OWNERS DO?

If you notice:

- A new skin lesion
- A wound that isn't healing as expected
- A growth that is changing, bleeding, or being rubbed



Have it assessed early!!

Prompt evaluation gives your horse the best chance of successful long-term management and helps reduce the risk of progression or complications.

OUR APPROACH

At Elite Equine Veterinarians, we focus on accurate assessment and diagnosis, developing individualised management plans, and minimising recurrence and complications to achieve the best possible outcomes. Our priority is supporting your horse's long-term comfort, performance, and welfare. If you're concerned about a skin lesion or sarcoid, we're always happy to assess and provide professional advice.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact us on 0412 619 740.

CASE EXAMPLE

This mare was diagnosed with a nodular on her chest. She was referred to Equine Medical Solutions, and treated with AW5 cream.

