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Fact or fiction?

Social media is rife with recommendations of 'miracle cures' for horse health issues. However, experts warn you to be wary of heeding old wives tales, as Eleanor Jones reports

Browse any online equestrian forum or Facebook page and you are sure to find worried owners asking for advice on their horses' health conditions – and plenty of people making suggestions for treatment.

Proposals range from toothpaste for sarcoids to herbs for lameness, and mouthwash for rain scald. But are these really 'miracle' cures – or could they do more harm than good?

One remedy which has been finding favour across the world is turmeric.

Facebook groups dedicated to the use of the herb have attracted thousands of members, who credit it for easing arthritis – in horses, dogs and humans – clearing the symptoms of sweet itch, destroying sarcoids and much more.

One fan is 24-year-old Chelsey Bamford, from Lincolnshire, who has been feeding it to her 15-year-old gelding, Teddy, for the last two months – with seemingly good results.

The part-Thoroughbred was diagnosed with arthritic changes in the hock this summer and has ringbone in his left foreleg.

"He was hopping lame," Chelsey says. "He wasn't using that leg at all, but dragging it."

"People said he was just stiff, but I know my horse and he wasn't right."

Out of the horse's mouth

Once he was diagnosed by Chelsey's vet, Teddy was given steroid injections to the hock, but she says he was still stiff.

"I had always been sceptical about turmeric, thinking it was all rubbish, but it got to the point where I had nothing to lose."

"I gave him the minimum people say to use and he looked brighter and happier straightaway."

"Teddy is now on one tablespoon of the paste a day and I can't believe the difference."

"People probably laugh when I talk about turmeric – like I used to – but I think it's miraculous."

"He gallops round the field now, and even jumped out of it the other day."

Chelsey is so struck by the difference in her horse, she plans to start taking turmeric herself,

for arthritis in her back, and hopes her mother will take it to help her own arthritis and osteoporosis.

"I didn't expect to see this much improvement," she says. "It means everything to me. Teddy is enjoying life again and we're enjoying each other."

"We'd only ever done dressage, but now we're jumping and I'm planning on hunting this winter."

"I thought I'd never ride him again, but he's the best he's ever been."

No scientific evidence

Research has indicated turmeric has anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant properties. More investigation is being carried out into whether it may shrink some cancerous tumours in humans.



Chelsey and Teddy:
"He's the best he's ever been"

"If there's something going on with your horse, don't start playing around with turmeric, ask your vet"

But, as independent equine nutritionist Alexandra Wesker points out, its effect on horses has not been scientifically proven.

"The research has been on human nutrition," she says. "The idea is it blocks a pathway that creates tumours, but only certain types. It's not an all-round miracle cure for cancer."

"What is true is it's a strong anti-oxidant. This means it neutralises free radicals, which can damage cells and DNA – and that damage can cause cancer."

"If you can support or help prevent that damage with turmeric, or other anti-oxidants like vitamin C, that's really good."

"But if there's something going on with your horse or dog, don't start playing around with turmeric, ask your vet."

"People sometimes think they will forget about the science and try something natural. But what the science does is figure out whether turmeric works, for example. It then looks for the active



Turmeric has anti-oxidant and anti-inflammatory properties

component, isolates it and finds out exactly what it's doing and why.

"I'm wary if you're playing around with natural cures. They can help, but if you know what works, stick to that rather than taking a gamble."

"A complete myth"

However, Alexandra is not one to stop owners using something if it works for them. She can understand turmeric being successful in treating sweet itch, owing to its anti-oxidant properties, which are beneficial within inflammatory conditions.

However, vet Imogen Burrows, of the East Sussex Cliffe Equine (a member practice of XL Equine), is sceptical.

"Wow, if I thought the same treatment, prescription-free, will fix all these conditions, I'll license it and become a millionaire," she says.

"The most common thing I hear suggested is turmeric for arthritis, sweet itch and sarcoids.

"I can understand these are all frustrating conditions, for both owners and vets, as there are no quick-fix cures.

"I think this is why people tend to look outside the veterinary remit for other solutions, as we don't always have all the answers."

"There's no evidence to support its use for these conditions. With sweet itch, maybe turmeric could put off insects, like garlic is reported to do by some owners, but I can't see how it would help."

Imogen is also concerned about owners potentially feeding large volumes of turmeric.

"If you're feeding such a strongly flavoured product in large quantities, you have to wonder what you're doing, as it's something completely alien to a horse's diet."

"There are certain natural products which have a basis – for example, willow bark is the basis of natural aspirin. But turmeric? It's a complete myth."

Don't do it yourself

One of the key points to remember before proceeding with any home remedy is you must seek veterinary advice.

In some cases, treating conditions yourself can have dire consequences.

Sarcoids are notorious for being difficult to deal with, leading some owners to try alternative cures, such as toothpaste or even Marmite.

But Imogen says this can have serious consequences for your horse.

"If you irritate a sarcoid, it's like an angry beast," she warns. "Interfering and using a



Some think toothpaste isn't just for teeth

What is turmeric?

The turmeric plant, curcuma longa, is a herb grown across Asia for its rootstocks, which are ground into a paste or dried and ground into powder.

The bright yellow spice has long been used in Indian and Chinese medicine as an anti-inflammatory agent.

The primary active aspect of turmeric is curcumin, the anti-inflammatory effects of which have been indicated by some studies to be comparable to those of hydrocortisone and phenylbutazone (bute).

Curcumin has an anti-oxidant action, protecting cells from free radicals, which is why it is considered as a superfood.

Various studies have indicated turmeric may help treat irritable bowel syndrome, arthritis and joint pain, as well as helping prevent or even slow the growth of some cancers in humans.

Vet Doug English's Facebook group recommends mixing it with oil and pepper into a paste before it is fed.



non-appropriate treatment can have disastrous effects, especially if the sarcoid is near the eye. You could make things a lot worse."

About 10 to 13 per cent of all sarcoid cases spontaneously regress, Imogen explains. So some of those who swear that Crest or Colgate has got rid of them, may be mistaken.

"It can be difficult to get your head around," Imogen admits. "They are tumours and they are malignant, but sometimes they just disappear."

"So, if an owner has tried toothpaste and the horse's sarcoids have noticeably got better they are likely to assume it's down to

that particular product. But for every horse that gets better, nine owners might have used it and the sarcoids have got worse."

"If the sarcoid does improve, it was probably going to go anyway. But we see many cases where the owner has interfered and it's burst or morphed into a more aggressive form."

"The trouble is, there are six types of sarcoid and each has a treatment it likes and it doesn't."

"We want to encourage owners to participate in treatment, but we don't want to find they're doing things without vet guidance, that go wrong and we have to pick up the pieces."

"About 10 to 13 per cent of all sarcoids spontaneously regress, so some of those who swear by Crest or Colgate may be mistaken"



Sarcoids are notoriously difficult to treat



Sarcoids need veterinary attention

Busting the myths

Vet Imogen Burrows shares her views on other cures suggested by horse owners.

THE CURE: Savoy cabbage leaves for swollen legs.

Imogen says: "I know pregnant women use them to help for mastitis when breast feeding, but there is no evidence for this. I think the idea is the leaves are cooling and soft due to the curly texture. The leaf itself adds nothing. In this scenario I would keep it simple with cold hosing or icing the leg."

THE CURE: A mixture of creosote and melted lard, left to set, for ringbone.

Imogen says: "I have no idea what this hopes to achieve, apart from one hell of a mess! Creosote can be caustic to the skin – maybe that's why the lard is there, as a barrier. But then what effect is it having? Ringbone is arthritis in the pastern joint. Nothing topical will help, but anti-inflammatories, a high-fibre diet, possibly with some supplementary oils, or a recommended joint supplement will be of more use in these cases."

THE CURE: Mix Listerine and water for bacterial skin irritations, especially rain scald.

Imogen says: "Listerine contains chlorhexidine, like Hibiscrub, which should be used at a 0.05 per cent concentration for antibacterial use. It makes sense, but

seems like a very expensive way of using Hibiscrub. Most people complain about its price, but use it far too strongly. A capful in a 12L bucket of water is enough. Listerine will probably work, but you would want to avoid any of the preparations with menthol or alcohol in."

THE CURE: Nappies for poulticing feet. Imogen says: "I love nappies! I advise clients to keep them in their first aid kit. They are super-absorbent and a cheap alternative for dry dressings, or for an oozing wound such as on the knees, hocks and fetlocks. Sanitary towels are also another winner in the first aid kit."



Nappies make useful, cheap dressings

my horse, what do you reckon? Then they can say: 'do this, or bring him straight in to the practice.'

"It saves money and time, and the client gets a good service."

"Contrary to popular belief your vet won't always want to see your horse – but they don't necessarily want you slapping toothpaste on him either."



Manuka honey is believed to help heal wounds