

## SARCOID FACT SHEET FOR OWNERS

### Introduction

A sarcoid is a type of skin tumour. It is the commonest type of tumour encountered in equine practice. The growths often appear suddenly and, depending on the type, can grow quickly. In some cases they can affect the ability of a donkey to wear its tack or harness, affecting its ability to work. Treatment can be expensive and time-consuming and a complete cure is not always achieved.

Sarcoids vary in appearance. Sometimes sarcoids can be confused with other types of skin growths such as warts. They may appear dry and scaly and may easily bleed or ulcerate. Some types of sarcoid are very aggressive locally, which means they tend to invade and spread in the tissue surrounding them. However, they are strictly limited to the skin and the tissue directly under it; they do not spread from the skin to internal organs.

Any suspicious lumps should be checked by your vet without delay.

### Causes of sarcoids

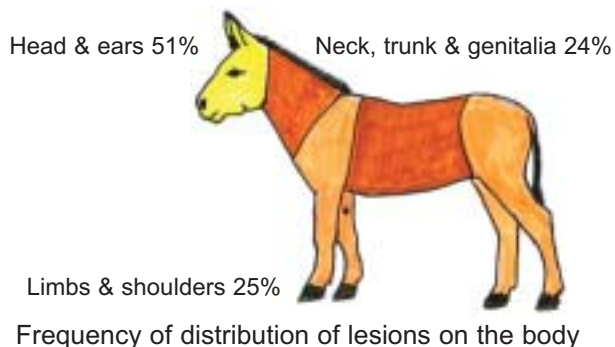
The cause of sarcoids is not fully known although there are a number of theories. One theory is that they are caused by a virus. Although no virus particle has yet been found, virus-like genetic material has been seen in a large proportion of sarcoids. A particular genetic characteristic has been identified in most horses with sarcoids, suggesting that a high proportion of the equine population may be genetically susceptible.

Some people think that insects, such as flies, have a role in the development of the disease. Certainly, sarcoids seem to occur at places on the body where nuisance flies commonly feed such as around the eyes. Flies are implicated in the spread of sarcoids over an individual animal, but whether sarcoids are transmissible between donkeys is very uncertain. Fly control measures on a donkey with sarcoids through the summer months is sensible.

### Parts of the body where sarcoids are found

Sarcoids occur most frequently on the legs, trunk and head, appearing either as single or multiple growths.

It has been observed that sarcoids may develop at sites of wounds and areas where trauma or injury has occurred.



### Types of sarcoids

Sarcoids have been categorized into six main types, each with a descriptive, scientific name (such as nodular, fibroblastic, verrucose, occult, mixed and malevolent). The names are not important for the owner; it is just useful to know that the appearance of sarcoids can be very variable. Here are some examples.



Some sarcoids appear as discrete, solid lumps of variable size. The lumps sometimes ulcerate and the surface bleeds or exudes fluid.

Sarcoids can also be fleshy masses, sometimes with a thin stalk or a wide flat base. This type often develops quickly from a milder form following damage and may develop at the site of skin injuries on the limbs. Another type of sarcoid ("verrucose") is grey, scabby or warty in appearance, occasionally with small shot-like, solid lumps within them. Sarcoids may also appear as grey hairless, often circular areas. "Malevolent" sarcoids are the most aggressive type: the tumours spread extensively through the skin. It is a rare form that is usually encountered in the elbow and face areas.

## Treatment

If you suspect that your donkey has a sarcoid, do not wait for the condition to get better: it will probably only get worse! Consult your vet when the first sign of a sarcoid appears. Do not attempt to treat the sarcoid yourself; the most appropriate treatment required will depend on the type of sarcoid present and this decision must be made by a vet.

Sarcoids are very difficult to treat effectively. Several treatments are commonly used: this suggests that no one method is universally effective. Particular types of treatment have variable effects. Some can be very successful on some occasions and ineffective on others. Failure of any treatment method is usually accompanied by the reappearance of a more aggressive tumour, often in increased numbers. Therefore, it is important to select the best possible alternative as the first treatment method.



Before treatment



After treatment

At The Donkey Sanctuary, "alternative" therapies are not used for sarcoids. Despite anecdotal reports, there is no clear evidence of their benefit. Assessment of an unusual treatment can be complicated in that, on rare occasions, sarcoids appear to get better without treatment. Delay in getting started with a treatment under the supervision of your vet may mean that the sarcoid gets bigger and, thus, more difficult to resolve.

**The following methods of treatment are used by vets:**

**Surgical removal.** This can be effective for very small sarcoids in safe areas. However there is a relatively high failure rate, with around 50% recurrence.

A related method (ligation) is tying a tight band (or using an elastic band) around the base of sarcoids with a stalk. This can cut off the blood supply, causing the lesion to dry up and eventually drop off.



Before surgery



After surgery

**Cryosurgery** (freezing). Liquid nitrogen gas is used in this form of surgery to achieve ultra freezing of the diseased tissue. This is only effective for sarcoids with limited size and depth. It is very time consuming and tedious if several sarcoids are to be treated. There can also be a high rate of recurrence.

**BCG injection.** This method works reasonably well for nodular and fibroblastic sarcoids around the eyes, but is much less effective elsewhere. The method has significant risks and so careful supportive medication is required.

**Chemotherapy.** An injection of certain drugs into the centre of a sarcoid is a useful method of treatment in some cases. These drugs kill the cells with which they come into contact. The material is also very dangerous to the surgeon and so special precautions must be taken and it is difficult to obtain in the UK.

**Topical cytotoxic therapy** (using a cream). This treatment probably produces the best results of the available methods. These substances are very strong in their effects and may damage normal skin as well as the tumour that the veterinary surgeon intends to damage. The method is limited to areas that tolerate skin scarring.

**Radiation therapy.** Although highly effective, this is very expensive and limited in its availability in the UK. It is used mainly for sarcoids around the eye.

Remember that early detection is important and can influence the success of the treatment. Check your donkey's coat and skin every day, especially around the areas that sarcoids can affect.