

Anthelmintic Herbs for the Health of Your Horse

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By Jessica Lynn ©

In the Webster's Unabridged Dictionary the word "anthelmintic" is derived from Greek "anti", which means "against", and "helminis", meaning "worm" - which in effect means "to kill or destroy worms or parasites".

The Power of Nature

Nature is such a wonderful thing, in that so many of its elements were intended to work together. There are varieties of seeds and herbs that when blended together will not only help to expel parasites, but will also assist in destroying most parasites (including most protozoa) along with their larvae or eggs, while preventing parasitic infestations. There are also plants found in pastures with high amounts of tannins, including chicory, yellow & green plantain (also sometimes called horse mint) along with coal-t's foot, echinacea, and raspberry cane, that have been shown to have natural properties which seem to be effective in parasite control and management... Horses have been known to, and will, seek out these kinds of plants and/or beneficial weeds for that reason.



Types of Anthelmintic Herbs

There are a number of "Anthelmintic herbs" which fall into different categories; some herbs may have several classes of action in the body and some have a combination of the following properties:

Vermicides - Kill a number of parasites including worms and protozoa found in the gut or elsewhere, including some found in the liver, spinal and cranial fluids.

Vermifuges - Expel the dead parasites and any associated debris, including fungal infections which may be caused by the die-off of the parasites, from the body.

The difference between expelling and actually killing the parasites can depend upon the herb or combination of herbs used, dosage given and how often it is administered. Anthelmintic herbs

can sometimes be very toxic in nature and should not be randomly used nor fed to any animal or person unless properly mixed and prepared by a qualified herbalist or veterinarian doing alternative practice. They should never be given to a horse that is ill, health challenged, or compromised in some manner, without advice. Herbal wormers may be given safely to foals as well as pregnant mares, but you must follow the directions carefully, and they should not be used haphazardly, but on a regular calendar basis.

Caution: Herbal products meant for human consumption or use should not be used on your horses, as most contain black walnut which is very toxic and can even be lethal to your horse.

Parasites, Chemical Wormers and the Immune System

Since many parasites are primarily transferred through manure from an infected horse and ingested while feeding, using a ground level feeder along with cleaning stalls, corrals, and even pastures at least once per day is just one part of a pro-active parasite management plan.

Using chemical worming agents on a regular schedule could be harming your horse, even more than the parasites/worms themselves, by compromising his immune system as well as his “natural digestive defenses” against them. Frequent chemical worming can even be contributing to new invasions of parasites by altering his intestinal

environment. Overuse of chemical wormers may also be contributing to laminitis in some horses, which may or may not lead to founder.

It is true that internal parasites can be silent killers, which may cause internal damage if not controlled. They can lower your horse’s resistance by robbing him of valuable nutrients, which would normally be used to maintain his immune system at healthy levels. In some cases a parasitic infestation may even cause gastrointestinal irritations such as non-specific colic or colic like symptoms, ulcers or ulcer-like sores.

However, the question begs to be asked: When did we all seem to buy into the frequent paste worming protocol, or even the daily wormers, without first questioning whether or not our horse actually had a parasite problem? Who was it that convinced us that our horses really needed a paste wormer on a 6-8 week or daily basis all year long? How often have we really checked the parasite load before giving a chemical wormer?

That is not to say, however, that even while using an herbal wormer, that your horses, from time to time, may also need to be chemically wormed. It all depends on where your horse is kept, general house keeping, and many other things, including fly control, and even manure disposal, or if you have foals on the property as well.

Foals and Parasite Exposure

Foals are born without much natural immunity or resistance to disease or parasites, however Mother Nature plans accordingly for this as the foal begins to build a passive immunity with the first milk it receives called colostrum. Colostrum contains naturally occurring antibodies to many organisms that the mare has been previously exposed to, by either natural “immunization” or contact, or “vaccine” as the case may be.

This natural inborn immunity begins to decrease by about six weeks of age, which is when Mother Nature intended the foal to start developing an immune system of its own. At this point the foal’s immune system will start producing antibodies to various organisms it comes into contact with, including parasites in the pasture or via contact with other horses or foals, in order to build its own healthy immune system.

Unless exposed to an excessively high concentration of organisms, a healthy foal will cruise through this time with few apparent problems, and will be able to develop its own natural defenses, including those against parasites, which will assist the foal to build its own natural immunity. I look at this time as a “Naturally Occurring Homeopathic Nosode” because the foal is becoming “immunized” to things it finds in its own environment, similar to how a Homeopathic Nosode works in immunizing as opposed to vaccinating.

Which is not to say that at some point they will not in fact become infested, which would have to be addressed on a case by case basis, as it depends again on barn, pasture and housekeeping practices, as well as other factors including climate, number of horses or other foals on the property, etc. And also depends upon if the weanling or yearling goes to sale and/or is moved to another area, or property that may have other organisms that it was not originally exposed to.

However, the caveat to this is that if they are never exposed and they are given chemical wormers, including daily wormers either orally or via the milk they receive from their mothers, they may never build their own natural resistance to parasites; no exposure will effectively compromise their immune systems.

For my own foals, I introduce herbal wormers at about the time that I start to introduce them to their own “bucket feeds” in small amounts. That way they become used to the smell and the taste. I do not chemically worm my mares just before or at the time of foaling, but do use the herbal wormers during the time they are in foal, and during lactation, and do fecal counts on a quarterly basis to monitor parasite counts.

When to Use Herbal Wormers

The best time to use herbal wormers for your horses is once per month during the five days of the full moon cycle, especially during the most active months for parasites, which is late

spring through fall, and depending upon where you live, you may want to use the herbal wormer all year. For centuries people have known that the full moon is when parasites are most active, and the herbs will do the best work.

Herbs Used for Their Anthelmintic Properties

Some of the powdered vermicide and vermifuge type herbs that I have used over the last several years and found to be very effective include:

Wormwood: Is one of the most bitter herbs and is best used as a part of a natural worming mixture. It is used not only against threadworms but also round worms. When I use this particular herb in a blend I most often also add green stevia to cut the bitterness but to also add naturally occurring pro-biotics to the digestive system as well.

Fennel seed: Is considered a liver herb and is historically used as a part of an herbal worming mixture, as some parasites are known to reside in the liver.

Cayenne: Helps to set up a hostile environment for parasites, repelling as well as expelling them. This herb is considered to be in the vermifuge category of herbs.

Pumpkin seeds: Are noted for expelling tapeworms from the body. Pumpkin seeds are also rich in nutrients which can assist in removing large quantities of uric acid from the horses body tissues, which may build up by the oxidation

caused by parasitic die off and will generally pass through the intestinal track in the fecal materials and a small amount may pass through the urine. This herb is also considered a vermifuge herb.

Garlic: Is a natural anti-biotic and vermicide. It is anti-microbial, anti-parasitic, anti-fungal, and anti-bacterial. Garlic is useful against round worms, tapeworms, pinworms, and hookworms. It is also useful as a flying and biting insect repellent when fed internally. Garlic is in the category of herbs called vermicides.

Thyme: Has anthelmintic properties and is ideal for digestive complaints, including colic, or colic like symptoms which may be caused by a parasite overload.

Red clover: Is considered to be anti-fungal, anti-viral, and may have anti-parasitic properties. It has been shown to be effective against large strongyles (also known as blood worms or red worms).

Olive Leaf: Research and clinical experience to date is showing that it may be beneficial in the treatment of conditions caused by various protozoa.

Ginger: Is also a very useful immune booster and anti-parasitic agent.

Prevention:

The horse's immune system holds the key to his body's health; it protects against viruses, bacteria, fungi,

parasites, etc. It is a miraculous and complex network of organs that contain cells that recognize and destroy foreign invaders, and those cells are nourished by his ability to uptake all of the necessary nutrients from his feedstuffs. Good horse nutrition is essential. Some horses, because of age, chronic infection, poor nutrition, stress, over-vaccination, overuse of chemical wormers, or overexposure to environmental toxins (chemical fly sprays, insecticides and pesticides on their hay, etc.) have a compromised immune system, usually resulting from a compromised digestive system, which leaves them more susceptible to parasitic infestations, viruses and other infections.

Understanding the timing and life cycle of the parasite is one key to prevention. The way you manage your soils, pastures, feed stuffs, and manure many times will dictate the load and kinds of parasites your animals will have to deal with. Parasite eggs thrive in warm moist weather, during late spring and into fall, and because the life cycle of the parasites mainly occurs outside the horse, understanding these cycles and good barn as well as pasture keeping practices will be key to your parasite management program. Rotational grazing (a few weeks on a pasture at a time, depending on conditions) helps minimize parasites and maximize pasture health.

Several researchers have shown that good nutrition and a balanced mineral

ration contribute to increased immunity and are an important contribution to a natural approach to parasite and parasitic infestation resistance.

Over the years I have also found that if you feed a concentrated garlic powder, beginning in early spring along with a concentrated probiotic/digestive enzyme formula, it will have the effect of boosting the horse's immune system, contributing to a healthy gut, and preventing parasitic infestations in the first place. The garlic also has the added benefit of helping to naturally repel flying/ biting insects as it causes the horse's skin to have an odor detectable to the insects. The garlic is anti-parasitic in the gut while the probiotics and digestive enzymes set up a hostile environment for most parasites and they also boost the immune system.

About the author:

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