Ticks on Horses: How to Identify & Control

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Troublesome Ticks protect your horse with ease

Ticks are frightening pests. In fact, these eight-legged and hard-bodied arachnids can scare even the most hardened horse owner. They are small and difficult to see. Their powerful jaws make them seemingly impossible to remove. They can transmit potentially life-threatening diseases. However, there are simple ways to spot ticks and safely remove them from your horse's skin.

tick types

Ticks are often divided into four basic categories. These include wood, dog, deer, and spinose ear ticks. However, there are many specific tick species within each of these categories. Some ticks are found across the United States. Others are limited to specific regions of the country. Thankfully, however, most ticks are fairly easy to identify.

Common Name	Genus & Species	Physical Description (Adult Ticks)	Range	Diseases Transmitted & Conditions Caused
American Dog Tick	*Dermacentor variabilis*	Dark brown with creamy-gray markings behind head	Eastern 2/3 of U.S.; Pacific Northwest	Piroplasmosis (Babesiosis); Spotted Fever, Tularemia
Brown Dog Tick	*Rhipicephalus sanguineus*	Uniformly brown; about half the size of wood ticks	Worldwide	Equine Granulocytic Anaplasmosis (Ehrlichiosis)
Deer (or Black-Legged) Tick	*Ixodes scapularis*	Tear drop-shaped; the size of a poppy seed as adults	Eastern U.S.	Lyme disease, Equine Granulocytic Anaplasmosis, Piroplasmosis
Gulf Coast Tick	*Amblyomma maculatum*	Oval with striped legs. **Females:** white collar behind head. **Males:** White striations throughout body	Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico coastal areas; Kansas; Oklahoma	Heartwater, African Theileriases

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Lone Star Tick	*Amblyomma americanum*	Rounded with striped legs. **Females:** pearly-white spot on back; **Males:** scattered white streaks on back.	Southeastern and South-Central U.S.	Lyme disease, Spotted Fever, Equine Granulocytic Anaplasmosis
Pacific Coast Tick	*Dermacentor occidentalis*	Light brown with a spotted white collar behind head	Pacific Ocean coastal areas	Colorado Tick Fever, Tick Paralysis
Rocky Mountain Wood Tick	*Dermacentor andersoni*	Tear-shaped, black body with brown and silver pattern collar behind head	Western U.S.	Rickettsia, Colorado Tick Fever, Tularemia, Tick Paralysis
Spinose Ear Tick	*Otobius megnini*	Peanut-shaped and covered with small spines	Western U.S.	Causes intense irritation, rubbing, and hair loss
Tropical Horse Tick	*Dermacentor nitens*	Dark black body	Southern U.S.	Piroplasmosis
Western Black-Legged Tick	*Ixodes pacificus*	Dark brown with a black collar behind the head	Western U.S.	Lyme disease, Equine Granulocytic Anaplasmosis
Winter (Moose) Tick	*Dermacentor albipictus*	Oblong oval shape, entirely brown body	Throughout U.S.	Emaciation, Anemia

It is important to know what types of ticks could affect your horse. At the very least, tick bites cause irritation and restlessness. However, large numbers of ticks can cause extensive blood loss that could result in potentially life-threatening anemia. In addition, ticks can also transmit diseases as they feed on their host's blood, such as Lyme disease, piroplasmosis (babesiosis), equine granulocytic anaplasmosis (EGA, formerly called equine ehrlichiosis), and equine infectious anemia.

tick control

Ticks are not species-specific parasites. In other words, the same species of tick that bites your horse could also bite you, your family members, or your other pets. Therefore, effective tick control is essential around your barn, pasture, and home. As with most insect control procedures, however, diligence is necessary to help protect your horse. To help prevent tick infestations, choose a suitable spray or wipe-on repellent specifically designed to control ticks. Also, carefully check your horse during regular daily grooming routines.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to spot ticks on your horse's body. However, all ticks will cause your horse to scratch. If you witness rubbing against a fence post or stall wall, immediately examine the skin in the area your horse has rubbed. If you spot a tick, immediately remove it. If you see a 1" welt along an attachment site, it is a sign that a deer tick has bitten your horse but since dropped off.

tick removal

Should you find a tick on your horse's body, remove it immediately. However, forget all the rumors you may have heard about tick removal. Do NOT crush or twist the tick, apply baby oil or petroleum, or "scare" the tick out with a lit match. These methods can cause the tick to regurgitate blood back into your horse, which increases the chance of infection or disease transmission. Worse, the above methods can cause the head to detach from the body, where it will remain beneath the skin.

Instead, use a pair of tweezers to remove the tick:

1. Grab the tick firmly by the head, where it enters the skin
2. Pull - do not yank - firmly and steadily straight away from the skin
3. Dispose of the tick properly in a small jar of rubbing alcohol
4. Wash the attachment site with a mild antiseptic
5. Wash your hands

Unfortunately, ticks can be difficult to kill. Their flat bodies prevent them from being easily crushed. Some have even been known to survive a fire. But once you have removed a tick from your horse's body, you cannot simply release it back into the wild. Doing so almost ensures the tick will return to your horse or another barn visitor. Instead, place the tick in a sealed glass jar that has been filled with rubbing alcohol.

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